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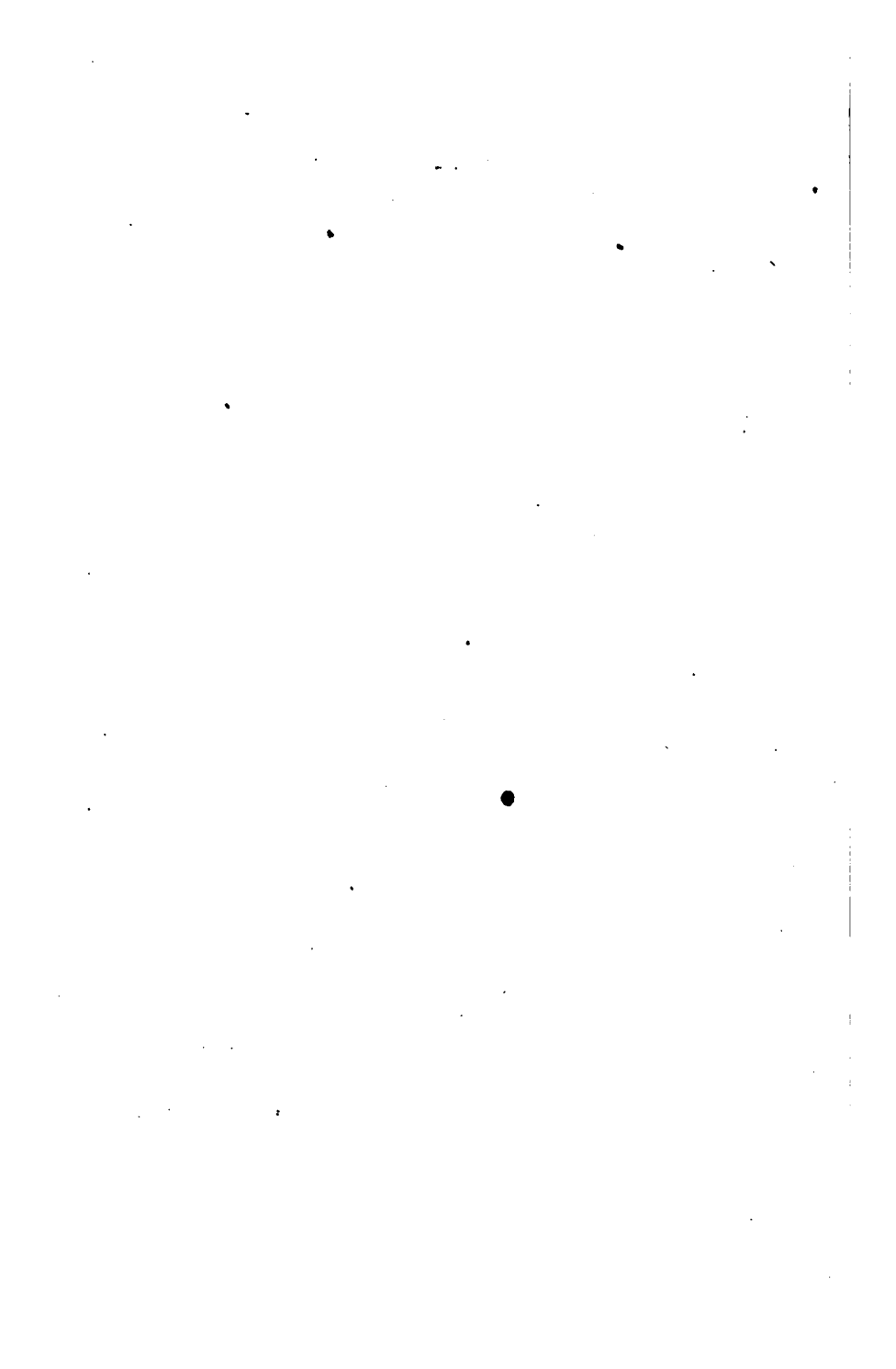


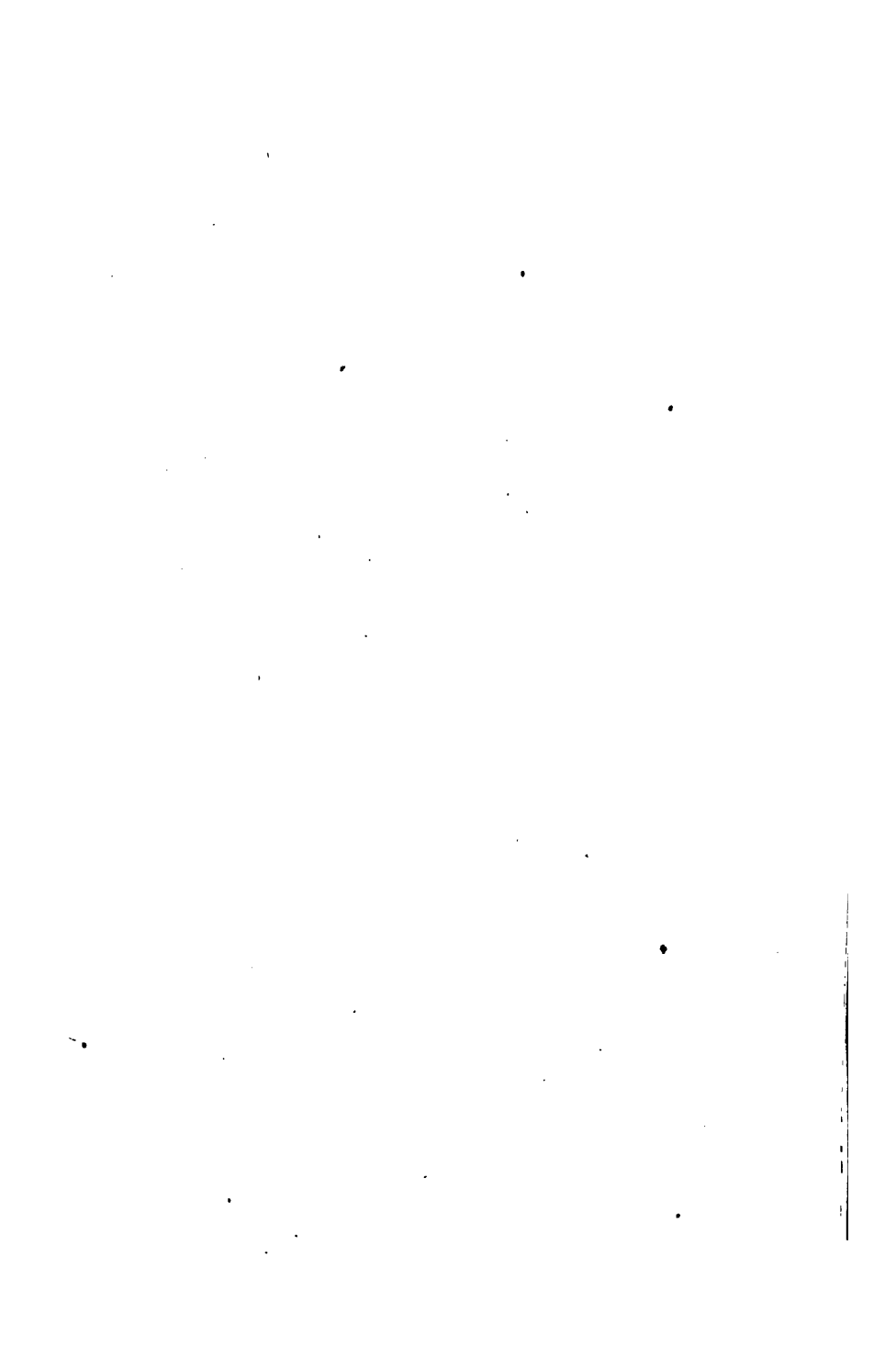


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THE
CHRONICLE
OF
ETHELFLD.

SET FORTH BY
THE AUTHOR OF "MARY POWELL."

250. b. 127.

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PREFACE.



E would not advise the frugal reader to consume too much midnight oil in ascertaining the authenticity of this pseudo-chronicle, lest he thereby impair his entertainment. We have collated it with that of Affer, from whose manuscript we derive nearly all the information we possess, and are accustomed to believe, of our glorious king. But doubts have been raised concerning the genuineness even of Affer's work; and had ALFRED written his life himself, there be those who would have found it done amiss. Let us earnestly enjoin the reader, therefore, to believe as much or as little of this work as he chooses: taking heed not to call anything in it an anachronism.

till he has searched the Saxon historians and likewise Sharon Turner; lest peradventure he himself be caught tripping.

There seemed no reason why our pseudo-translation should not be in the modern vernacular, save in the occasional use of an archaistic expression which had "no incongruity nor unnatural strangeness," to suggest the good abbess's own use of an evident Saxonism badly Latinized.





CHRONICLE of ETHELFLED.



BOOK I.

FORASMUCH as sundry persons have taken in hand, whether with or without reason, to fet forth in order the notable things which in divers times and places have happened, it seems good also to me, Æthelfleda, Abbess of this poor house of St. Audrey, to record certain events, for causes that will in fit season appear.

I Ethelfled, second daughter of Athelred, furnamed Mucil, Earl of the Gaini,¹ was born in the year of our Lord's incarnation 858. My sister Ethelfwitha was by five years my elder. Now it came to pass, about a week after her first coming into this naughty world, that my mother had a dream concerning her, somewhat after the fashion of the patriarch Joseph, to the effect that

¹ Gainfborough.

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the child newly born should eventually be set up on high, and that her father, mother, and kindred should do homage to her, which in due time came to pass. And this gives me occasion to think that dreams are not always mere phantasies of the brain, but that on occasions suited for the discernible action of a superior intelligence, visions of forthcoming events are sometimes disclosed to the inward and spiritual sight.

By reason of the frequent incursions of the pagans, who laid hands alike on live stock, arms, chests of plate, and noble damsels, my father was fain to commit my sister and me to the care of an aunt, who was Superior of one of the very few religious houses left in Mercia for the refuge of holy and high-born virgins. This was about the time of the good King Ethelbert's death. Ethelred his brother then reigned over West Saxony in his stead. That was in the days of our King Buhred. It mattered very little to my sister and me who reigned, as long as mother Gundred let us see her hive the bees and take the honey. Ethelfwitha was fairer and more facetious than I, therefore the greater favourite; and being by so many years my

elder, had many pleasures and indulgences which I had not ; but, on the other hand, I had many pleasures too, all to myself. For instance,—fabling certain flowers to talk to one another and to me, and to tell of their how and about. Also fancying certain trees and patches of chalk on the hill-side into images of dragons and ghosts until I was sore ydrad, and yet feeling a strange mixture of pleasure and trepidation in going up to the dragon's mouth with a handful of grafs, and saying, “Dragon, will you bite me?” and then running away. There were certain peep-holes through the oak-palings, and dark corners among the tree-roots, that I should have been sorry if any had wist of except myself. Once, lying under a hollow oak, I seemed to feel the fairies pulling at my hair, that they might get withinside of the trunk. One of my peep-holes looked into our burial-ground. I knew defunct persons lay there, their faces all turned upward ; and my aunt the Abbess told me their souls went to heaven. I thought if I kept a sharp look-out, I should see some of them going there, on a starry night, if any of the nuns would but die.

There was a Sister who, I think, was as

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learned as Leobgitha, the correspondent of Boniface. She was always making enigmata, and poring over manuscripts. Of her I acquired my facility of writing, which the King says is remarkable; but, in regard of its neatness, I am always at the mercy of my pen;—however, I now always have a good one.

About the year 869, my sister and I were sent home. Thenceforth, my father, mother, and Ethelfwitha were much at court; but, by reason of my tender years, I went not. After one of these their visits, it was currently reported among us that Alfred, Prince of the West Saxons, whose sister had married our king, would shortly come to see our chafe. The best tablecloth was washed, and many dishes were cooked; howbeit, he came not. The fewer, the better cheer; and I was less disappointed than was Ethelfwitha. This time, she told me so many fine things about the court, that when they all returned to it, which they shortly did, I felt for the first time lonely. They had made a pretty clear larder before they went, and I was left nominal mistress of the household, both servile and freed, but with very little to do, except to see a stag now and then put his head

out of the forest. They might have been gone three hours, and I was eating bread and honey, when there winds me a horn at the gate, and, lo you, Prince Alfred come by himself, and nobody to receive him. Eadwulf took his horse and his spear, and Urfried washed his feet; but what could we do? The best tablecloth in the buck-basket, no fresh meat in the larder, nor had I even the key of the cellar. There were eels in the dike; and a goose hung by the wall, if he would have waited to have it boiled: howbeit, he made light of all, said bread and honey was fit for a king, especially when the bread was warm, and the honey fresh from the comb; and Adam's wine was better than mead or metheglin for a water-drinker like himself, who shunned wine and cyder like John the Baptist. I was glad to find him so easy to please; indeed, had never lighted on so cheerful and winsome a young gentleman; and, having seen but few gentlemen before, whether young or otherwise, by reason of our retired living, I shortly lost all fear, forgot he was a prince, and made him welcome to what we had, as freely as if I had known him twelve years, that is to say, my whole life. He asked me how I came to be so

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small for my age. But I could not tell. He asked me if I could read, if I said my prayers, if I loved bread and honey, and if I were afraid of him. To the three first I said yes; to the last, no. He said that was right, and arose pushing aside the yldestan-setl, and bade me good speed, and bear in mind King Solomon's saying, "To eat much honey is not good;" and so departed. But, when he had mounted, his horse reared at our white owl, that suddenly flew out of its hole, and threw the prince, whom we picked up with his bright hair all dabbled with blood, and brought into the house. He did not seem to regard it much, but gave his orders to one and the other with wonderful precision; and, being laid on a double-setl, Urfried and I washed and bound up his wound as we best could, and two of our freedmen rode off to advertise the King, and bring back my father and mother. Hereabouts, I Ethelfled must relate that Urfried's fear of approaching the blood royal had at first been so oppressive and unwise-like, that she had thrust me forward into office more cowardly than a woman of her years needed to have been; but, as soon as she found the prince affable, would have made my tender

age a reason for setting me aside, and stepping into my place. Howbeit, his grace settled it by desiring she should instantly make him a dish of frumenty, and stir it herself all the while it boiled ; and then he bade me sit over-against him on a tripod stool, keep an eye to his bandages, and nurse him the best I could ; observing that he always found himself the better for a great deal of attention.

And hereupon ensued a discourse, wherewith I have frequently recreated my nuns by repeating it to them. Poor maids ! they sometimes get a little dull, specially between Whitsuntide and Christmas, when there are no great festivals ; and I find nothing sooner brings all things straight than a little innocent conversation, chiefly in the infirmary, where a good many find themselves in the fruit and pulse season, and a good many more contrive to be nurses. We should never forget we were once young ourselves.

After I had held my peace a good while, the prince asked me if I could tell him a story. Thereupon I put it to him whether he would have Morvidus and the dragon, or Corineus and the great giant Goëmaggot. In reply he said,

that when he had heard both, he would make his choice. So I told him first one, and then the other, and proceeded to ask him whether he thought there had ever been a dragon. He said, yes, there was one always going about, seeking whom it could devour. I said I hoped it would never come my way. He said, oh yes, it would, sooner or later; I must mind what I did, or even thought, or he would swallow me at a snap. So then I found who he meant.

I asked him whether he would not like to see a fairy. He said he had seen one once: he was riding one day, all alone, through a dark, glooming wood, when he came upon a bright, green glade; and there, very much to his surprise, he saw a fairy. I could not help drawing a little nearer to him on this, to ask him what the fairy was like. He said, like a woman, only a very small one, with a lily skin, and long silky hair, and dressed in blue. I said I thought they always wore green. He replied, "Why, they do say so, but this one had a cyrtle just like yours, with a little darn in the hanging sleeves, from her leaning on her elbows." So then I said, Oh . . . ! and was a little shamed; for I found he meant me.

He asked me what I would give to see a giant. I said, a good deal. He said, that was no answer at all; would I give the next handsome present I expected to have, whatever it might be? After some thought, I said yes, provided I were out of harm's way. He said, Ah, he had been thinking of giving me something very costly, in return for my civility to him, but now he would keep it for himself, and take me with him to fight the Danes, for he understood they had just landed a giant as big as Goliath, very fond of human flesh, especially when young and tender; whose fist was heavier than a hundred sledge-hammers, and his foot as large as this . . . here he drew the outline of a foot about a yard long in the air; his cloak was fringed with kings' beards and ladies' tresses; and there was a yard or so of fringe yet wanting. He should like to go out against him like David the son of Jesse, and bring him down with a pebble. He'd teach giants to come to England!

I said, I marvelled that the Danes dared intrude on us as they did. He said, "Why, I suppose you know we are only intruders ourselves. What fellowship have we with the old Britons whom we have hunted into the Cambrian

dens and fastnesses? Surely you have heard of wicked Vortigern, king of the Britons, who first invited us over, under Hengist and Horfa; and how, when the pagan Hengist (for we were all pagans then) came into his Christian presence, he said, 'I regret your ungodliness, but am glad of your coming.' King Vortigern ought to have known better, but he was much given to drinking and sleeping, whereas our Hengist, pagan though he was, was a brave and fine fellow, standing seven feet high, as I have been told by one who never saw him. But Vortigern was nidering, and deserved the end he had, which was to be smothered with smoke in his fastness, like a wasp in his nest."

After some farther parley on this and that, he called for another story. I said, I have told you two, you must now tell me one. He said, "Two? you have told me a hundred!" I said, "How can that be?" and just then my father and mother came in, somewhat to my regret; they having met some one on the road who told them of Prince Alfred's visit, which caused them to turn back. They fell to condoling and excusing; and the Prince said there was no need; he had been so deftly tended by the handiest

little chatterbox he had ever met with in all his life. Thereupon my mother looked grave, saying I had commonly been accounted silent; which indeed was true enough, and I wist not how my tongue had on this occasion become loosed. But there was something about him, methinks, that thawed all hearts. My mother applied all-heal and wound-wort to his head; and I kept near him all I could; but Ethelfwitha approached him not, only questioned me straitly at bed-time, of all he had said, so that we spent half the night in talking.

It was Ethelfwitha's wont to take me on her knee, and with her silver comb to comb out my hair, which was not nearly equal, in length, to her own; her locks being, indeed, as long and yellow as Queen Guinever's. Seeing me hold something fast in my hand, she sayeth, "What have you there?" I laughed, and would make her guess; at length, said, "Some of the prince's hair which we cut off to wash his wound." "His hair?" then cries she, "what are you going to do with it?" I said, "Make a ball of it." "Oh, filly, filly child," she then cries; "forsooth you must give it me, I will find a better use for it." But I closed my fingers

fast on it, and said, "What shall you, then, do with it?" After a pause, she said, "Use it in place of gold thread to embroider a kerchief for the Virgin." So I gave her all but one long, pale brown curl, which I have even now, (for it is not every one can show a lock of the hair of King Alfred,) but, in truth, Ethelfwitha kept not her vow, for the Virgin's kerchief has never been embroidered from that day to this.

Next morning, I was summoned to my mother, who was sitting surrounded by her maids. "Child," says she, "Urfried tells me there was a bare larder yesterday, which I partly apprehended, though enough went down from the hall, I should have thought, to have kept you for a week. However, twice-warmed meats are not for a royal table; and yet his grace informed me over-night, you had feasted him like a king! What am I to believe?"

My heart smote me when I bethought me of the havock we two had made, and I cried hastily, "In troth, mother, 'twas he emptied the honey-pot rather than I, he laid it on so thickly; and I dared not say him nay!" My mother could not forbear smiling; saying, as she tapped me

on the cheek, "Well, you seem to have saved the credit of the house."

Before noon, that day, there was a dinner prepared that might have been set on King Arthur's round table. I peeped through a chink, and saw Ethelfwitha present the basin, and my father carve the venison, and my mother kiss the cup. Howbeit, the prince only touched it with his lips; so demand was made for spring-water, which, amid so many sweet and spiced beverages, had never been provided; and, every hand being busy, Urfried gave me a pitcher, and bade me run down to the spring, which I gladly did. By the spring sat an old man, tuning a harp. I bade him make way, because I was in haste for water for Alfred the prince. He said, "Is Prince Alfred here?—then I will into earshot of him, for he loves the sound of a harp" and, following me up to the house, he commenced playing at the gate, and was soon let in. In truth, the afternoon proving rainy, and the prince drinking no wine, nor playing at tæfel, scaccorum, nor any game of hazard, this old harper's arrival was very opportune, for he went on, from one ballad to another, as if his head were lined with them, and Alfred the prince

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was hugely pleased ; in special with one that told how Baldulf got into King Arthur's camp, disguised as a glee-man, and, while he was harping, learned all he wanted to know, without ever being found out. He called it a good stratagem.

At length the prince asked the harper if he had ever heard of the song of Cædmon. " That have I, my prince," returned the minstrel ; " and can sing it, too : how that some of the angels kept not their first estate, but fell into perdition, because they would have shared glory with the Higheft ; and how He made for those perfidious an exiled home. Sweet as honey is that stave describing their first blifs :—

" 'They were very happy,—
Sin they knew not,
Nor to frame crimes ;
But they in peace lived.' "

Also, how the earth and stars came to be created out of nothing ; and how the first man and woman, beautiful as angels, dwelt in Eden-garden : 'tis a song-o'-Sunday !"

" Sing me as much as you can of it," says the prince, " and I will presently give you this gold bracelet."

"I dare say your glory knows," pursued the harper, (who was a Cornishman; his name was Tinne,) "how holy Aldhelm availed himself of this our vocation to instruct the lower sort, and took his stand on the public bridge, like a common harper, to win the ears of the foot-passengers by intermingling gay and grave matters." . . .

"Aye! believe ye," interrupted the prince; "I have heard all about him a hundred times; but now begin your song, or you will not conclude till midnight."

* * * * *

The following year, (868,) there befel a grievous murrain among all cattle; and after the murrain a famine throughout the land; and after the famine, a pestilence; so that the hand of the Lord was heavy upon man and beast. It was lamentable to see the dead bodies left by the way-side, with none to cover them out of the reach of birds and dogs. The poor people might be seen ravening on half-putrid flesh, and eagerly devouring the cresses and ramps that grew in the ditches; which unwholesome diet was enough of itself, my mother thought, to account for the pestilence. But the failure of

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the crops was a manifest visitation of God ; and as He foreknew that the scarcity of wholesome diet must needs drive the people to eat that which was pernicious and unclean, the sickness, to my mind, was an indirect chastisement from Him too. We gat much to our knees in prayer ; and Ethelfwitha, who was very soft-hearted, prayed my mother to let her have all the bones, scraps, and broken food from our table, to seethe into pottage for the poor, and dispense at our own gate, which my mother willingly did, and thereby drew down on our house many a poor soul's blessing. And it befel that, one forenoon, Ethelfwitha and I, having provided a larger mess than usual, and carrying it forth to the folk at the gate, steaming, and very savoury, there appears Alfred the prince standing among the rest, looking fixedly upon Ethelfwitha, who at first marked him not ; and presently, without more ado, he steps up, and kisses her before all ; an unfair thing for even a king's son to do, seeing she could not defend herself by reason of the full bicker. And the people, with one accord, set up a shout, as if it were the jolliest sight eyes ever saw, to the great shame of Ethelfwitha.

The prince dined and supped with us, and told us of many things he had seen in Rome when he was a cniht;¹ and talked, and harped, and fang, and did more to entertain us than we could do to entertain him: in special, as Ethelfwitha was quite dull all the afternoon. But I was full blythe, and at last he fell to talking with me more than any: only it befel, that while we were cracking and eating some nuts, he paused of a sudden, and I looked up and saw his lips quite white, or rather blue, and a cold, grey shadow on his brow. I cried, "Oh, mother!" and she arose in haste, saying, "What ails you, sweet prince?" and commenced rubbing his hands. But presently he smiled, and said, "This prick at the heart is passing off . . . it is all for my good!" Howbeit, there was no more merrymaking that afternoon, but we sate cloſer and quieter, and looked more earnestly at one another, and talked of prayers, and saints, and penances, and heavenly chaſtenings, and earthly probations, and celestial refreshings; and I think the latter end of that day was better than the beginning. He spent two days with us; and on the evening of the second day, he

¹ A little boy: a lad.

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took my father aside, and had long speech of him;—we concluded, concerning the pagans, who seemed drawing together in Northumbria, upon some mischief. It may or may not have been so; howbeit, my father came forth from the conference with a strange mixture of care and elation on his brow; and the prince was much flushed, and sprang on his horse, that had long been pawing the ground at the gate. As he rode off, he cried, laughing—

“I am now one of your family by the law of the land, for I have slept two nights under your roof; and if I do any wrong on the king’s highway, you will be answerable for it!”

“That be my care, sweet prince!” returns my father, cheerily: “May I never have a more dangerous *cuman*¹ under my roof! Return when you will, whether in company or steorless.”

He was out of sight before one could say Ave. To bed we went, but not to sleep; as for myself, I lay awake, thinking over all the brave things I had heard, and ejaculating inwardly, “Happy they who hold thy stirrup and water thy horse! happier they that carve before thee at table, and hear thy pleasant

¹ Come-one: guest.

voice !” As for Ethelfwitha, though we were in the dark, and she lay long quite still, I had an impression that she was weeping ; so, to make sure, I kissed her, and found her face quite wet. I asked her why she wept ; she answered, she could not tell me, because she did not know herself. So there was an end, only I took care not to worry her by my own wakefulness, and lay a musing of Prince Alfred in the streets of Rome, till somehow, or ever I was ware, I fell on sleep.

I must now mix public affairs with private, because of those pagans, the Danes, whom the East Anglians having with great pusillanimity received and set on horseback, with less anxiety for the general welfare than for their own particular safety, they had established themselves in Northumbria. The news now came that the invaders, not content with having seized the city of York, were advancing upon us Mercians ; and, indeed, they followed so closely on the heels of the news, that before we well wist they were on the move, they had taken possession of Nottingham, which the Romans well called “ the house of caves.” For the town is sheltered by a huge rock, perforated with numerous caverns

and passages, some of which pierce it even to the summit, doubtless wormed in it by the people of some obscure age, whom, in these modern times, we have altogether lost sight of; and there is a spring of water above as well as below, which makes this rock a notable stronghold in time of war, and doubtless will continue to do so while the world lasts. Now it fell, that so soon as the pagans had seized Nottingham, we were all in a fore strait; and King Buhred sent to my father to wit what he should do, and my father's counsel was, that he should ask succour of Ethelred, and King Buhred said no one was so fit to ask or so likely to obtain it as my father; so he sent my father to the West Saxon court, and King Ethelred gave ear unto him, and promised to come with Alfred the prince, and the Earl of Berks, and a great army to assist the Mercians. Now, the pagans kept close quarters all the winter; but so soon as ever the rivers unfroze, and the roads were practicable, or ere there was a bud on the bushes, or a bird on the tree, we all rose to arms. I say we, albe I Ethelfled only looked on with other women and children, for we all had a pretty strong interest in the issue; and there were troops of men tramping

past our gates daily, and glad of water and bread, and anything they could get. It was an expensive season to my father and mother, for King Ethelred, Prince Alfred, the Earl of Berks, and Ofric his brother, came and went to and from us all the time of the siege; but it was losing something to save all, and I am sure we never grudged them our best; besides which, as there was always something going on, they made the house very pleasant. Howbeit, the pagans had entrenched themselves so strongly in Nottingham Castle, that there was no dislodging them. So peace was made with them, solely against our wills, and the West Saxons drew off their forces with King Buhred's consent, seeing he could not get them to stay any longer.

At this time, every tongue spoke in praise of Alfred the prince, now in his twentieth year, who was the darling of all hearts, and certainly of mine. This, I was going to say, was all in an innocent way; but I may rather assert that it was more than that, and did me much good; for it is of infinite value to young persons to be admirers of some living excellence; and as to any vain imagination of being brought into nearer conjunction to him than I was already, I

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no more thought of it than of being married to the north star ; chiefly applying my mind to the reconsideration of whatever fell from his lips, which, young as he was, had mostly something wiselike and farfighted in it. These cogitations I was well able to pursue while my hands were busy at the loom and spindle, and their effect was to wean me very much from puerile things, and make me thoughtful and womanish. Howbeit, my appearance was still that of what in truth I was, a mere child. How amazed was I to hear that there was a treaty of marriage on foot between Alfred the prince and Ethelfwitha ! Of some things, I was, from a child, very observant, and reflected much on them ; of others, not at all. Hence it came, that had I not been told of this projected alliance, a long time might have ensued before any of its signals had warned me of its coming. As it was, the surprise and joy mazed me, so that I believe I showed not myself so gladdened as in truth I was ; especially as the thought of losing Ethelfwitha, when it dawned upon me, dissolved me in a shower of tears. But she consoled me all she could, by dilating on the blessedness of continually consorting with such a companion as

Prince Alfred, and promising to have me much with her in the royal city of Reading. On my mother's side, as is well known, we are of royal descent; therefore Ethelfwitha was no ill match for a king's younger brother; and as there was no reason for delay, the betrothal took place speedily. The Earl of Berks was one of the Prince's sponsors; and the transaction, to my mind, was very interesting and imposing. The foster-lean was settled, and the morgen-gift agreed on, which was to consist of sundry large parcels of land for three lives, with men and horses thereunto belonging; and so much more land for Ethelfwitha to bestow on her nearest and dearest of her own free choice, for the term of her life and after it; always providing that if she were widowed, she should for a twelve-month keep herself in the peace of God and of the king, before she married again.

My father, not to be outdone, promised to give with her two thousand swine, which was thought a good deal of by those whom Alfred the prince called "the spinning side," *i. e.* the female part of the house. Since, as every one must see, this was adding gift unto gift, and enriching that which was already of infinite

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worth ; and our Saxon laws most wisely provide that presents shall universally come from the other, that is, the brydcuma's side, where there is anything to bestow, if it be but a hen ; since a man must think a wife little worth the having if he will not pay pretty handsomely for her, and think her a good bargain too !

However, Alfred the prince was not to be excelled in generosity even by my father ; and to the morgen-gift he added, over and above the men, horses, and land, presents worth the two thousand swine once and again : to wit,—rings, bracelets, necklaces—one of them curiously twisted like a serpent—crosses, circlets, buckles, a golden brooch shaped like a fly ; wimples, tunics, cyrtles of silk and samite ; fine linen, mentels, cuffian and binden,¹ a mirror ; a handbell ; a golden footstool ; a silver foot-bath ; fringed coverings for seats and high-settles ;² wallhangings worked with the Siege of Troy ; a bed-curtain presenting the Landing of King Brute ; a coverlet woven with golden flowers ; another, for winter, of dressed skins, wondrous light and pleasant ; gold and silver and glass cups ; pouches, purses, curling-irons,

¹ Cuffs and ribbons.

² Heah-setle.

—in fine, everything a royal lady could need or wish.

Now, though the morgen-gift was not due till the day after the wedding, many of these valuables arrived beforehand, in large corded chests, to the great delectation of the “spinning side;” and I, among the rest, had the oversight and the handling of them, which, to a girl of such tender years, was no small privilege. When the prince came a courting, the Earl of Berks was oftentimes in attendance on him; but, still oftener, he came by himself, when least expected, (save that we were always expecting him in our own hearts,) and sometimes he would find Ethelfwitha and me walking together in the chase, and would come springing towards us as fleetly as any hart in the forest. But, though he would come up to us as blythe as blythe lark, it almost always befel that before we had been long together, he would become as serious as an apostle, and talk of graver matters than one would have expected from so young a man. But whatever fell from his lips was pleasant to Ethelfwitha, and to me Ethelfled. The wedding-day now drew nigh; and people were drawing together from various parts, to be

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present at the festivity ; and there was great mustering of men, both servile and freed, to beat the woods for boars and wild deer ; and snares were laid for smaller game and fowls ; and pits were dug to bake the meats that were not broiled nor sodden ; and hampers of pears and apples were brought from the orchards, and eels from the dike, besides haddocks, skates, lampreys, lobsters, and oysters, from the seas and rivers ; and sacks of fine flour, and fysters of honey : for there was much people to be filled.

In due course came the royal purveyors, to see if there were enow for all ; and the head purveyor said unto my mother, " You have enough and to spare of everything, if so be that your mead run not short." But my mother said, " We have enough of mead, morat, and metheglin."

Now, by reason of the report of the wedding spreading far and wide, jocularators of all forts, or as we say, glee-men, began to assemble ; some with bears, some with dancing dogs, and other some with jugglers' balls and instruments of music. These began, beforehand, to set up their booths and stages round the green, under

the skirts of the forest; by reason of whom, our chase, that was of late so retired, became rather unsafe walking. My mother would not have me go forth, unless under the care of Eadwulf the freedman, who was brave, faithful, and good-natured. I remember, one day taking the air with him in the woods, we came upon a ceorl cruelly maltreating a cniht of our household, who by reason of his burthen could not requite him as he deserved. Eadwulf, without more ado, took and bound the ceorl hand and foot with his girdle, and laid him at length on the ground. Having thus made him feel his masterdom, he stood over him leisurely, and, with a stern look which he knew very well how to put on, said, "There thou lies: now then, what shall be my will of thee? If I blind thy thief's eyes, I must fine forty shillings; if I lame thy clumsy feet, I must fine thirty; if I deafen thee, twenty-five; if I break thy thumb, twenty; if I crop thine ears, twelve; if I take thy little finger, eleven; if thy great toe, ten; if a slice of thy Dane's nose, nine; if thy forefinger, eight; if I break thy jawbone, six; if one of thy ribs, three; if I knock out one of thy teeth, a shilling. Go to! thou's not worth

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a shilling unto me, the whole bundle of thee !—the cniht's beyond thy reach now, so go thy ways, and ne'er deal the like with a poor harmless fellow again."

So saying, he undid the girdle, and let him go free ; when the ceorl, bounding out of arms' length, shook his fist at him, and grinning horribly, cried, "Thou's bound a ceorl unfinning ; and, by the law of the land, shouldst fine not one shilling, but ten, an' I could catch an' keep thee !" And so went off, reviling ; leaving Eadwulf laughing at his impotent anger. Alfred the prince was amused at the transaction when I told him of it, and, the next time he saw Eadwulf, gave him a mancus.

To proceed, however, to the wedding, which, if I were to spin out this chapter to the length of Gildas's epistle, I must come to at last.



BOOK II.

WHEN I, Ethelfleda, consider the enormous disproportion between the most aggravated and prolonged sufferings of this present life and the glory that shall hereafter be revealed to us, it seems to me that were this little span one entire spasm or throe, we might gratefully so purchase the everlasting bliss. Whereas, we very well trow that this thorn-strewn path is interspersed with many sweet flowers, and watered with many refreshing streams, and overhung with many wholesome, unforbidden fruits ; and that its course lies through many a deep glade and cheerful meadow, alternately in the cool shade and genial sunshine. Well, therefore, may the holy apostle of old remind us that our present afflictions, which are but for a moment, are working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

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But reflections such as these do not, it is true, obtain their full masterdom under the immediate pressure of trials that wring from us strong crying and tears. And such being the case, it is no wonder that I Ethelfleda, then a mere child, should have been sorely grieved that my sister's wedding dinner was spoilt as it was. Three days the feast arose; on the third day, Alfred the prince, clad in weeds of peace, was seated at table between my mother and Ethelswitha, with a circlet of gold about his head, and a golden cup in his hand, and a smile and cheerful saying on his lips, when he suddenly gave a sharp cry, that made every one's blood run cold. You may be sure every man and woman there present started up or looked aghast, thinking he was either stabbed or poisoned; but none were so amazed as was Ethelswitha. They had both risen up, and he had staggered towards her a little, with his hands on her shoulders, his head drooping, and his face and hair steeped in a clammy dew. Then it was that my mother, who says that the same thing can never astonish her twice, did with all her composed stateliness cause him to be borne away to his chamber, attended by my father and Ethelswitha; and did

check and allay the universal panic and ferment by telling the company, truly, the prince had a spasm she had seen him taken with once before. Having thus peaceified the assembly, she departed with all haste to the prince's chamber; and I Ethelfled, who, if I had been less of a child, should have remained and done the honours in her stead, did, by reason of my youth, steal away from the confused groups, and make for the ante-room of the prince's chamber, having no access whereunto, I hung about for a while in the outer gallery thereof. And, looking forth of the lattice at the gaily pranked groups on the green, the pavilions fluttering with ribbons, the booths loaded with cakes, the gleemen harping and piping, archers leaning on their long bows, wrestlers rolling on the grass, and children scrambling for nuts and halfpence,¹ I wondered within myself, childlike, how folks could be so unfeeling and so happy.

But they were not so, in fact, at least the elder and more thoughtful, though I wist it not at the time. Many were astonished, some in tears, and every one anxious for tidings of the prince's welfare. For he was greatly loved of all.

¹ Helflinge.

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At length, my mother coming forth, composed, but very pale, said, "You here, Ethelfleda? we should both be in the hall." I said, "Oh, mother, what has hurt your hand? it has five wounds on it." She looked at them and began to weep, saying, "The print of his nails in his strong pain; I marked them not till now." But she wiped her eyes, and went into the hall directly; I close following. I remember not much of that heavy evening, every one seemed out of tune. Feigned mirth is heavy; and feigned sympathy heavier. There was a minstrel who did us good service by singing the doleful song of Beowulf, which, at the speediest, is three hours long. The men drew about him, and many gerefas and thanes that pretended to listen consulted on the expediency of taking leave and ending the feast. My mother began to look harassed; she whispered to me, "See if you can glean tidings of him;" so I went and found the outer gallery full of yellow torch-light and of people waiting quietly. I passed on through the now empty ante-chamber: Ethelswitha came to the door when I tapped; she said, "He is sleeping now, help me to disengage my veil, and be within call in my little room."

So I undid her veil, which had been sent from Rome, and was as fine as gossamer, worked all over with silver stars ; and I unclasped her golden slippers ; and then, having advertised my mother of the prince's repose, I obeyed my sister's behest, and betook myself into her little dressing closet. After a time, I heard horses' feet softly treading under the window, and looking forth, could make out, by the light of torches, my father bidding hushed farewells to sundry guests. Still looking forth, but noting nothing, I mused of all that had befallen during the last three days, which seemed now to have no reality in them ; the gay carolling and winding of horns before daydawn ; the hunters and dogs dispersed over the dewy grass, impatient to start . . . Alfred the prince stepping forth, a gay bridegroom from his closet, people huzzaing, dogs baying, horses champing, the gay sun shining over all—

Then the noontide feast—royal and noble guests arriving—minstrels harping—rich gifts presenting—Ethelfwitha as fair as May—tables spread all down the hall and along the green—others spread in green bowers—baked meats smelling everywhere—wine, ale, and cyder run-

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ning—my mother seeing to all, and at leisure for everything—

The archery, the prizes, the bride on her flowery throne ; the rustic sports, the music. Supper, jesting, complimenting, mirth growing noisier ; every one full of themselves, and yet ever looking at the bridegroom and bride . . . all at once brought to a pause by that exceeding bitter cry.

In the stillness of the night, I could hear one of the guards without ask his fellow, " What made him, wit ye, so cry out ? " The other responded, " They may say what they list ; I take it that he was tormented of the devil." Musing much of this, and of the distinctions between chastisements and temptations, I fell on sleep or ever I was aware, with my head on my arms and a prayer on my lips ; and thereupon had a dream, which was, indeed, but that of a child, yet which, for its singularity and the impression it made upon me for a long time afterwards, I cannot refrain from here recording.

Methought I was still waking, and reclining, because of my weariness, on an oaken settle that stood over against the casement, when a bright figure stood suddenly beside me, and said,

“Arise up quickly !” So I did ; and we passed through my sister’s chamber, where she and the prince lay strait and stiff, like two monumental figures on an altar-tomb carved out of stone ; and her veil of stars, which methought she still wore, hung nigh unto the silver lamp, but burnt not. For why ? A watcher sat at their head, and another at their feet, clad in long white garments, looking holier than men, stronger than women, fairer than either ; and they were keeping ward. So we left them, and passed on through the outer door, that unclosed and folded again of itself ; and without, in the gallery, were the lights burning dim, and men dropped asleep after all sorts of fashions ; but, among them here and there, spiritual beings in orderly array, silent and attent. At each door and each bed head as on we passed, were still other vigils on guard ; and so we passed on from the chief chambers to the low, narrow, and close rooms and offices round about the courtyards beyond ; and even here, too, amongst the tired servants, were other watchers. In special, I marked two in the women’s quarter leaning over a poor wench, Æthelice by name, of fearful and sorrowful mood, and one said softly to the other,

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“How troubled she is above measure!” and the other made answer, “Yea, but not for long.” Then the first saith, “’Tis a vain terror, a mere shadow she has started at;” and the other saith, “Yea, but whileas it lasteth, ’tis no mere shadow to her!” and so made a cross on her forehead, and its furrows disappeared. But the brightest watcher of them all, in appearance like to a king, stood by a poor esne¹ that was driven from pillar to post from morning to night. This angel had a pale blue star on his brow, and was so deep in thought, that he noted us not as we passed by. Then we came into the outer court, into the dark glooming shade and cool night air; and, methought, my guide said, “Go forward, and see the wonders of the night.” So I went forward alone, and a little but not much afraid, into the chase, which soon became a forest with moonlit glades. But here and everywhere I encountered spiritual beings, in companies or alone; some in inaudible discourse, walking, standing, or lying; some busied among the leaves and flowers; and it seemed unto me, that every tree and herb had its gardener, though so shadowy, so silent, so like it in colour,

¹ Slave.

as to be only with pain made out. None looked on me, but many looked up, and I wist not whether there were more of gravity or happiness in their faces. After a while, they seemed all to look round with reverence at some one preceding me, and then quietly return to their labours; but I could see none before me. However, I came at length to a high wall, still in the blackness of midnight shade, and in the wall a door, and in the door a key; and I heard some one between it and me turn that key, and that door opened and I went in. Withinside, I could discern rather than see there was a fair garden, for I could smell aromatic herbs and sweet spices, such as are used by our priests, and the odour of sweet flowers; and once and again my foot caught in the tendrils of creeping plants that seemed to grow too rankly, intermixed with weeds. A pleasing kind of fearfulness overcame me in this garden, and I went on through a tangled foot-track that descended pretty steeply to the brink of a little lone pool or well, lying in the darkness of brightness. It looked so cool and pure, that I took some of the water in my hand to drink, but it tasted bitter; and I stooped over it to look in its clear

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depths, expecting to see myself reflected in it; but, instead thereof, lo! another face, not mine own! And I trembled, and awoke.

. . . There was Ethelfwitha standing over me, looking haggard in the grey light of dawn; and she said, "Poor child, sorrow hath made you heavy to slumber; send me my women, and go you and sleep on your bed."

So I did as she bade me, and sank into dreamless sleep; for, indeed, I was new to night watching. The busy throng soon dispersed; and the prince, making out from his leeches that they knew not what ailed him, and could give no certitude of speedy recovery, gat up from his couch, saying, "Then I'll bear it as best I may." And calling me to him, he took from his vest a little note-book full of wiselike sentences and saws of Scripture, whereon he loved to look, though he was not fluent at reading; and he bade me write therein a saying of Ethelfwitha's, which had much pleased him,—"Jesus hurts but to heal." Having fulfilled his behest, I returned it unto him; when, regarding it admiringly, he said, "Thou'rt the featest little scribe in Christendom or Kent! I will give you my silver pen."

* * * *

It came to pass after those days, that our country had no rest. Without, were fightings; within, were fears. We were tried and put to the proof every way; in assaults, in sieges, in pillagings, in the burning of our houses, in the destruction of our crops, in the peril of our lives. What wretchedness did those pagans, the Danes, occasion! yea, what weariness of living; yea, what difficulty to live! I have known rulers in high places as hard put to it in those days for a dinner, as were the princes of Samaria during the siege, when an ass's head sold for fourscore pieces of silver; and though a man were liable to the heels-fang or neck-catch if he gave his servants fleshmeat on a fast day, meat of all sorts was so hard to come by, that I fancy the rule was never less observed, except upon compulsion, for all ate a hearty meal when they could. As for the lower sort, they were fain to see the pottage of ramps, cresses, and refuse, such as, in common, only the swine would eat; and would hardly, I think, have refused strong drink, though a mouse or weasel had died in it, in spite of the penalty; for what escaped the troops of Tema, the companies of Sheba licked up; of Hubba, that is, and Hingmar, his brother, the sons of Lodbrog the Dane. It would seem they

had come up from their place in the North, as Gog and Magog in the prophecy of Ezekiel, with all their bands, into the land of unwall'd villages, and to them that were at rest and dwelling safely, to take a spoil, and to take a prey, and to carry away silver, and gold, and goods, and much cattle.

In those days was it feelingly to be experienced, in the words of the holy Shepherd-king, that it is better to fall into the hands of God than of man; for albeit the famine and pestilence had been hard to bear, the war was much worse. These infidel wretches embittered the very morsel between our teeth, scouring the country like troops of wolves, violently taking away our flocks and feeding thereof, driving away the ass of the fatherless, and taking the ox of the widow, turning the needy out of doors, and causing the naked to lodge without covering; insomuch that they were wet with the showers from the mountains, and constrained to burrow in caves and holes of the earth, or to roost in the forest for shelter. As for ourselves, . . . to-day there would not be a man on the premises; every soul of them fluttered like sparrows from corn; anon, like the sparrows to

their meat, they come back again, every man with his hart or roebuck, or maybe a handful of them with a wild boar ; and so we eat and are refreshed, till a cry comes sooner or later of " The Danes !" Howbeit, I am running on too fast, into the middle and latter part of the year, and must return for a little to the beginning of the spring, after my sister's marriage, when the clods of the valley began to show their tender blades, and the primrose and celandine to peer forth on the banks, and jack-i'-the-hedge to show his saucy face along the bypaths ; and the jays and starlings to chatter, and the wry-necks to pipe, and the rooks to utter their hoarse notes. I had shot up very fast, of late, into a mere cornstalk, and had, I think, a little outgrown my strength ; add to which, I had applied somewhat too closely to a wall-hanging I was working for Ethelswitha, so that I lost my health a little, and was dull and sorry of cheer : but my mother thought I should clear up in the spring ; howbeit, I did not. The subject of my hanging, which was lovely, I will here describe. It was the flight into Egypt, which has always had somewhat about it very pastoral and pleasant to my mind. Joseph and Mary would, no

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question, thun the walled towns and populous villages, and trace their way through the most sylvan and sequestered paths. How pleasant to camp out, in that warm climate, under date trees and palm trees, out of reach of the enemy, sleeping on honeysuckle banks, crossing brooks, resting in cool valleys, and dining under hedges! . . I depicted them, to the best of my ability, halting at one of these rustical resting-places; the aſs turned loose to graze, Joſeph dipping water from the ſpring, Mary ſetting out their frugal repaſt, and the Holy Child looking with grave ſerenity at two pieces of wood, fallen over one another in the form of the croſs. It was a delightful ſubject; only that I Ethelfled wiſt not how to make the rivulet look as if it wound away into the diſtance; it would go up into the ſky. I thought about it and dreamed about it, and I think over-application to it made me ill of cheer, but my mother thought I had taken the lung-ail,¹ and dieted me on cheſtnuts and honey; but this doing me no good, ſhe made out that I was bewitched; and in the following manner.

Straying one morning in the cow paſtures,

¹ Conſumption.

hunting for the first primroses, there comes me a pretty white doe, flitting among the bare trees, and presently trots from the brake close up to my side. I hold out my hand, which it licks; and to my surprise I note a leathern bottle tied about its neck with a thong. On handling the same, I find some drops of sour milk hardened about its mouth, and guess whosoever hath tied it about the doe's neck must depend on it, somehow, for a supply. Remembering Elijah and the ravens, I tempt the doe towards the dairy, feed it with crumbs, and fill the bottle with milk; whereon it trots away as though its mission were fulfilled. Day after day it returns with the empty creche, which I as constantly replenish; and at length I am advised to track the pretty creature into the woods. Having now become friendly with me, it ambled on a little in advance, oft stopping for me and then trotting on again, till it had led me much further than I reckoned on, quite beyond my knowledge, and far away from home. At length I became scared, doubting how I should find my way back, and apprehensive of some salvage beast rushing out upon me; . . . as for the more harmless sort, we scattered herds of

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them, right and left. All at once we reach a glooming brake, with dead men's bones whitening among the grafs, as though some death struggle had occurred there long ago; and in the midst a prodigious huge gnarred oak, of unaccountable age, and embost with mofs; in the hollow of which cowers or crouches an old woman, a gnawing of her arm, as it seemed to me, and muttering in a strange, eldrich fashion, "What ho, Thor! what ho, Odin! Bring back my little lad . . . Did he then? Lordsfake, who'd mind a child? What wouldst have? here's feverfew, thyme, an' honey — indeed purslane's wanting . . . oh! oh!" And seeing the doe trot up to her, she clasped her skinny arms about its neck, undid the bottle with trembling hands, drained it as though she were famishing, and then fell to kissing and hugging the doe as though she were crazy, which indeed she was. Her face was more like that of a man's than a woman's, more like a fiend's than either; her skin like old brown leather, eyes red as ferrets, with grisly hair falling over them. Nor had I a doubt, hearing her name the names of the Danish gods, but that she was a wicca or witch; and, in my

fearfulness, making a little rustling noise which caught her ears, she started up, caught sight of me, and was about to fall on me, when a savage growl from behind, followed by the spring of a huge, hairy, dark body over my head, towards her throat, so scared me as that I fell lifeless to the ground. When I recovered, there was Eadwulf's great black and tawny bloodhound licking my face, and Eadwulf himself, with eyes as red as his hair, coming up all panting. His first greeting was, "Tell 'ee what, mistress . . . thou's led me a pretty dance ; and may I be hung for a Danes' spy if e'er I let thee out o' sight of us all, so long together again !" He'd been crying, I think ; and I was somewhat cowed, so 'companied him homewards quietly enow, without saying, as I sometimes did when he chode me, "Where's the harm?" or "Where's the wrong?"

Some foresters, whom we met by the way, reported old Mulla, as they called her, to be a harmless maniac, whom the pagans had bereft of her wits by slaying her sons ; howbeit, my mother apprehended her to have somewhat of malign power about her ; and seeing me much fluttered by the encounter, would have it I was

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bewitched. An ashen bough was therefore placed over my pillow, and Gunfried, the wife woman, was called in. As for the doe, I regret to relate that the poor harmless creature was chased away by the serfs, who held it to be little better than its mistress.

I had a secret fear of one who, like Gunfried, was reported to have some mysterious insight into bodily and mental diseases; which left me, however, the moment I saw her; for she was the keenest, yet gentlest and sweetest looking old woman I ever set eyes on. She took me readily in hand, and made much of certain herbs which, to be of any good to me, I must gather at daydawn myself; to wit, white horehound, hyssop, brownwort, parsley, rue, and groundsel; of each twenty pennyweights, seethed in a fyfterful of old ale till half boiled away; of which I was to drink a neapful cold every morning fasting, and in the evening as much warm. To collect the roots and fresh leaves, she and I footed it together over the early dew many a May morning; and, whether owing to the fresh air or to her medicine, I became quite strong and well. Many a wife lesson did she teach me of the goodness and glory of God, as

set forth in the properties of this and that herb and flower; and many a lovely tale did she tell me, that carried me quite out of myself. On my putting it to her, one day, why the herbs, to do me any good, must be gathered by my own hands, she, smiling, made answer,—

“There are many things which, to be of any good to you, must be done by yourself. You must pray for yourself, you must sleep for yourself, you must eat for yourself. Can my having a full meal afford any nourishment to you, wit ye? We must all walk along the strait path ourselves, if we would wonne through the gate at the further end of it.”

I have often since thought, how sad to be old Mulla! how happy to be old Gunfried! There was everything about the one to make old age fearsome; there was nothing about the other to make old age otherwise than pleasant.

Now, ever since my encounter with old Mulla, my walks had been more guarded and circumscribed. For some time, save with Gunfried, Eadwulf, or some of our own women, I stirred not. Howbeit, as habit bates sense of danger, and over-charge is onerous, I gradually became less watchful and watched, and made

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long progresses in and about the woods on foot, attended only by the wolfdog Bran. One day we met a prodigious large wolf, who had scarce glared on me with his red, hungry eyes, when Bran throttled him and laid him dead at my feet. I was so pleased with myself for being no more scared than I was, that it was the greatest effort to me to refrain from bragging of it on my return home; howbeit, I abstained, that is, for three days, lest my walks should thereon be forbidden. At the end of that time my natural sincerity made the concealment extremely burthenfome unto me; and, as the Psalmist expresses it, "my heart was hot within me." Howbeit, it seemed so stupid and shameful then to reveal a matter I had already made a secret of, that I could not bear to tell it, except to my confessor, to whom I mentioned it in confession, but so slightly, and, as it were, in parenthesis, that I much think the old man never heard it at all. Howbeit, I got absolution, which peaceified me at the time, though, in the end, neither that nor my old "Where's the wrong?" proved of any avail; and I refrain not from saying that since I have come to mature years, I have done penance for that little fault.

However, the secret . . . (I pray thee, reader, bear awhile with my garrulity,) the secret, I say, was not to be so kept, whether I would or no. Previous to the appearance of the wolf, I had been knitting bluebells about Bran's neck with an azure twine; and the very next time we three went that way together—Eadwulf, Bran, and I, Bran pulled Eadwulf by the skirt of his skin hunting-frock, to the place where the dead wolf lay, and looked up in his face, as much as to ask whether he had not done a clever thing. The moment Eadwulf saw it, he cries, "Hey! here's been death-work! This twine is thine, mistress!—I marked it, last week, in thine hand. Did the wolf, then, fly at thee?" I hastily cried, "Dear Eadwulf, it did;—but don't tell. It did me no harm, you see." He stood musing, and looking on me awhile, the blue twine still in his hand, and then delivered himself thus:—" 'Don't tell,' thou says, mistress? and, 'it has done thee no harm?' Has it done thee no harm, mistress, if it comes to '*Don't tell*?' Why, thou's putting a rope round thine own neck, and giving me the other end of it. I've only to say, Wolf, or to growl a little, or to say, I wish I had a piece of twine,—to make

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thee ready to kill me! . . . I cares for thee, mistress, as thou wert mine own daughter; howbeit, let it be as thou wilt. . . . An thou bids me, I'll not tell."

So, of course, I consented to make no secret of the matter any longer; and all the better, I think, for my own heart and soul. Trifle as it was, I have often since remembered the wolf.

I know not whether I were at this time what is ordinarily thought comely. Ethelfwitha was always so much more prized than myself, that I thought as little of myself as the rest did, and never much troubled the mirror. In sooth, I was apt to take too little rather than too much thought of what I should put on; and left the charge of my hair, which was now very long, entirely to my women, who seemed to me to spend a good deal more time than they needed to have done, in smoothing and trifling with it. But the sensation was pleasant and soothing, and left me to pursue my own thoughts; so I never hurried them. My father called me his apple-blossom; and, one day, I heard some one say, to another one, without thinking I noted him . . . somewhat about . . .

"Sweet as the breath of morning." . . 'Tis
strange how we remember fuchlike things.

* * * * *

About this time, for as young as I was, my marriage with the Earl of Berks became the common report; not that I had seen much of him. He was a brave man, with a face like an owl; and I must say, I should have preferred his younger brother. However, it was, of course, quite out of the question to think of the latter, since, though noble, he had not forty hides of land, and could not sit in the witenagemot. The earl his brother was goodhearted, but somewhat tedious. He sang a song at the prince's wedding, that, had he not been who he was, every one would have lost patience with. Notwithstanding which, had we been espoused, I could have found it in my heart to be unto him a good wife; but, on the whole, am thankful it went otherwise. My mother thought me too young; my father thought, if 'twere delayed too long, it might, in such unsettled times, never come to pass at all. Had he had his will, I Ethelfled might not now be writing this chronicle.

However, the lamentable event which de-

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prived me of my intended husband, demands a new book,—not to say a better and more moving writer than my most contemptible self. Nor is it to be supposed that I should ever have attempted to preserve, by my mean pen, events so worthy of a much better narrator, had it seemed likely that, in the much greater importance men attach to themselves and their own sayings and doings than to those of other people, any other chronicler would address himself to my task, or, if he did, be able to make half so much of it as I can.



BOOK III.

ALREADY have I, Ethelfled, recorded, in my unconnected and unwise-like fashion,¹ that as soon as the winter broke up we began to be harassed by the Danes. In those evil days, there was no safety to be relied on in religious houses; for these relentless pagans cared not a whit for consecrated ground, but pillaged and burned abbeys and monasteries all along the coast. When I consider what the state of England then was, I think that, let things hereafter fall out as ill as they may, they can never be much worse than they then were; or at least, not till the end of the world, when we know that a greater contest will ensue between the powers of light and darkness than has ever yet befallen. My father,

¹ These self-depreciating expressions continually occur in the monkish chronicles, and are not so much to be taken for indications of humility as for ornamental figures of speech, or what were meant for such.

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with the concurrence of Alfred the prince, conveyed my mother and myself, with all our women, to a certain tower or stronghold, built by the Romans, of three storeys in height, with a winding stair, such as we have not yet skill to build; and belonging to the Earl of Berks. Herein we found not only the earl's mother and sisters, but our own dear Ethelfwitha; together with as many women and children as could be crammed within the walls; to say nothing of sheep, oxen, calves, goats, and fowls, that were the necessary but disagreeable companions of our confinement. Here, however, we were thankful to enfeeble ourselves; while the pagans advanced upon the royal vill of Reading, and scoured the country for plunder. They were attacked and beaten by the Earl of Berks in a very fierce battle at Englefield Green, four miles from Windsor; and one of their notable and detestable chiefs was slain by the earl's own hand, to the great elation of us all; I catching the tone from his mother and sisters, and vainglorious with the best of them. Short was our triumph: four days afterwards, King Ethelred and Alfred the prince attacked them like lions at Reading, but were repulsed; and the brave earl of Berk-

shire¹ was slain. The grief of his mother and sisters was endless ; but, what was very moving, they conceived that my loss was greater than theirs, which in verity it was not, though for company's sake I wept very plentifully. Alfred the prince worked off his grief and rage in the best way possible for us all, by attacking the pagans four days thereafter in the most infuriate manner, at Aston in Berkshire ; not supported on this occasion, I am sorry to say, in the way he should have been, by the king his brother, who took to his prayers in a very questionable manner, though quoting the precedent of Moses and the children of Amalek. Sorry should I be, the head of a religious house, and of considerable reputation for my piety, to say any thing detrimental to the character and motives of a prince held in so great esteem by the clergy ; and the power which an author possesses of bestowing untold-of celebrity or obloquy upon those who come under their judgment, should make him or her extremely careful how it is expressed ; especially in a matter so private and sacred as prayer : but the more we hold by the real thing, the more jealous we are of its simu-

¹ Many counties were called shires before Alfred's reign.

lation; and when King Ethelred might have been on his knees all night, and availing himself of many casual opportunities afterwards, 'twas a shame of him, I think and will say, when day brake, to persist in keeping in his tent, and leave his brother to bear the burthen and heat of the day. The end of it was, that as Ethelred would in no case come out, Alfred the prince got all the glory as well as the toil; for he winnowed the Danes like chaff, and though the ground was very disadvantageous to him, he drove them off it completely, and pursued them towards their head quarters till dark.

I shall never forget the gladlike sound of his horn winding under our window that night! He had come all across the country at the price of immense fatigue after such a day, and reached our stronghold a few hours before daybreak. Ethelfwitha, starting from her sleep beside me, cries, "That's his horn!" and puts her head out. He cries from below, "Have you a corner in the tower, think you, for me?" She makes answer, "I hardly think we have . . . wait a little while; we will see;"—and, drawing in her head, hastily commences dressing, and I do the same; concerting between us all the while, how

we may bestow him with any convenience. Meantime, dogs bark, men begin to wake and start to their arms; and, by the time we gain the common hall, all is astir and in confusion. We unspar the door, Alfred the prince comes in, gay and yet toilworn, and in the first place stumbles over sundry fotha of firewood that lie within the threshold, then salutes Ethelfwitha, makes for the hearth, and talks and laughs while we revive the dying embers and warm some cakes and ale; finally, falls asleep on a tressel, without missing pallia or cortinas. We did not see him again of long time.

A fortnight after this, King Ethelred and Alfred the prince fought the pagans at Basing, but were routed by them, to our great dismay and sorrow. As one misfortune commonly treads on the heels of another, it came to pass that King Ethelred thereafter fell sick, took to his bed, and died, to the great regret of the monks, in spite of their saul-sceat.¹ They buried him in Wimborne Minster, within the walls; which, indeed, was once a common privilege enough, though now, from a regard to common sense and care for the general health, it hath become

¹ Money paid to the clergy when a death occurred.

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restricted to the clergy, and to persons of notable godly lives. Much people assembled to accompany his exequies, and many tears were shed for him by the priests. If I should also add, by the people, it would sound well, but would not be the truth, which a woman of my notorious sincerity is bound to speak at all times unless she holds her peace. Nor can I aver that his death was more regretted by myself than the demise of any crowned head must needs be by every loyal subject, which sometimes is very little; our affections not being under our own control, but depending greatly on the conduct and character of others. This event was indeed one of those dispensations which deserve much more thankfulness than sorrow, both from the kingdom in general and my own family in particular; for hereupon Alfred the prince became Alfred the king, and my mother's dream respecting the exaltation of Ethelfwitha was verified, which I mentioned at the beginning of this chronicle, and which, surely, no one reading with the least attention can have forgotten; but if they have, they had better look back for it. That the honour and glory of this accession to the throne might not puff us up with dangerous exulta-

tion, it was wisely ordained that the honour and glory should for a time be extremely little, and that no other advantage whatever should come of it, but on the contrary, harassing cares, deadly danger, and oppressive responsibility. For the pagans, like snakes that have been scotched but not killed, were now swarming round us with horrid fury ; and, possessed with the idea that Alfred the king could make no head against them now that his brother was defunct, did absolutely substantiate the same by giving him a desperate beating at Wilton Hill. I have heard clerkly men who had studied at Rome tell of some famous heathen prince or deity, I forget which, who every time he was thrown to the ground gathered fresh strength ; and thus it seemed to fare with Alfred the king, who, in the words of the prophet Micah, might exclaim, " Rejoice not over me, O mine enemy : when I fall, I shall arise." However, the wicked and unholy answer which the Danes would seem to make in their hearts was, " And if you do, you shall fall again ;" so the only question to be settled was, who should hold out the longest ; or, as we say in playing at scaccorum, which should get the last move.

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This most tiresome warfare, which might have been settled as well by one trial of strength as by fifty, to the great saving of life, trouble, time, temper, arms, and wearing apparel, continued throughout the summer and great part of the autumn; when some providential successes accorded to Alfred the king, who by this time had learnt feelingly enough that victory came not by his own arm, since *that* he never spared, —some providential successes, I say, enabled him to get the upper hand of the pagans for a while, and to make his own terms with them, which were, that they should immediately depart out of his coasts. And though they, with that disregard for all good faith, and habitude of mendacity for which these unbaptized wretches are above all unconverted people distinguished, only drew off to London, to ensconce themselves there comfortably through the winter, till the fighting season returned; yet this pause, this breathing time, was very refreshing to our souls. As faith good Zacharye, we had “helth fro’ oure enemies, and fro’ the honde of alle men that hatiden us;” and we had time to look about us and recover ourselves, and lay our plans, and thresh our corn, and sow a little wheat during

the open weather, and even to make merry a little; but above all, to look up to heaven and pray. It seemed as though heaven were listening to us, now that the earth was silent, and that the voice of devout supplication had all the greater means of being heard. About this time, Ethelfwitha brought forth the first of her many children, who was called Ethelfleda, after myself, which I always held to be a very pleasing compliment. Alfred the king now began to feel himself a king in right earnest; and the court being more like a court than it had behoved to be for some time, and my long promised visit to it being remembered, I was summoned by my good sister to hold my goddaughter at the font, and spend the remainder of the winter in Winchester; which summons I right readily obeyed.

Having lived a removed life the greater number of my days, which were none of the longest, I had indulged in many a dream by day and by night of the deliciousness of a court life, the which I now looked to see verified; but it turned out quite differently from what I had expected, save as regarded Ethelfwitha's affection and kindness. In the first place, Alfred the king was king after a very different sort from King

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Ahasuerus, of whom we are told that he gave a feast unto his people that lasted a hundred and fourscore days ; after which, he and his intimates did nothing but drink the sweet and eat the fat for seven days more, under heall-wahrifts of blue, fine linen, and purple. Alfred the king ruled after a very different fashion. Gladlike would he have been, such was the largeness of his heart and his tendernefs for the poor, to have had the wherewithal to feast his subjects, from the greatest unto the least, for a hundred and eighty days, or even for one day,—to have set the wine and ale running, and had an ox roasted whole in every town and thorp. No such days for lavish expenditure had he ; more the pity ! Every man was thankful for a meal when he got it, without inquiring too curiously when he should have another. Holy Neot, indeed, who was then much at court and for ever preaching to and at the king, did enlarge much on his hardness of heart in not relieving every case of distress that came in his way, and whensoever he had an ache or pain, insisted that it was a judgment upon him: but I trow the good man, who could be both sweet and bitter, rather exceeded in this matter, though with perfect good

intention ; and, had he himself been in the young king's place, would have found it hard to do more than he did. In truth, who ever did as much, one way and another ? He was ever wakeful, ever careful, ever afoot, ever crowding into his little breathing time whatsoever he could for the benefit of his kingdom.

Howbeit, the more he deserved men's confidence and commendation, the less he seemed to think of his own merits. He never appeared to measure himself by this and that person, or to think, "Of how much more worth am I than King Buhred ?" or king any other ; but to have some invisible, indwelling standard, to which he never could come up. As to his devotions, he not only attended all the daily services of the church, and received the holy communion every morning, but he often arose by night to pray alone and unseen. Now this course of life, so full of business, care, and forethought, had in the space of a few months already made King Alfred a very different man from what he was when he kissed Ethelfwitha at the castle gate ; and the incessant strain on his mind made him look many years older than he was ; so that I was altogether disappointed of regaining the merry

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companion who had helped me to empty the honeypot and to tell stories of Morvidus and Goëmaggot. In place of this was some one wiser, busier, graver, yet far dearer to those who knew him, of whom it might literally be said, that happy were his men, happy were his servants, which stood continually before him, and heard the words of his mouth. As to his thirst for knowledge, it was insatiable. I must confess, that in all this time he had not yet found leisure to learn to read with anything like fluency, save from a little Psalter he had carried in his bosom from boyhood,¹ the words in which, from continual application to them, he knew at sight. Howbeit, he caused others to read to him continually, myself among the rest, whom he thought fit to commend for a pleasant voice; and hence it cometh that there is no word, even the longest, that I cannot with the utmost certainty read off. This is an accomplishment that Ethelfwitha would gladly have shared with me; however, she never gave the same time and mind to it, having so many other ways of pleasing herself and the king, and so many other duties

¹ "Clerc he was good enow, an' yet, as telleth me,
He was mo' than ten years old ere he conned his a, b, c."

to attend to ; nor is there need for a queen to read at sight, or have stæfen-craft¹ like a bishop or abbess. Those wiselike clerics, however, who behoved to be then or afterwards the most frequently exercised in this office, not only on account of their fluency, but of their natural and acquired wisdom, beyond what a woman has any opportunity of ascertaining, whether she has in her or not,—were Wenefrith, bishop of Worcester, a man most excellently skilled in holy writ, whom the king has employed to translate Pope Gregory's Dialogues into Saxon ;—Plegmund, archbishop of Canterbury, a devout and scholarick man ;—Ethelstan and Werewolf, the king's chaplains, both of them erudite and pious, and of great service to myself in many things, especially in acquiring the rudiments of Latin ; howbeit, they were too exclusively churchlike, if an abbess may say so ; all Mercian men ;—Grimbald, provost of St. Omer's ;—John the priest ;—and last, not least, the king's cousin, holy Neot, who was frequently about the court, scattering seed, as he said, by the way-side, and trying to make the dry bones live. I remember, in special, one evening, when the king was indif-

¹ The art of letters.

posed and lying on his couch, after having been bled by advice of his leech, we heard a bustle without, and, on asking at the king's desire what it meant, were told that Neot had just arrived. He had come, not with any pomp or retinue, but afoot, like the holy apostles, after preaching by the way in towns, villages, castles, and in the open country : as it is written, " A mule for the priest, a mare for the bishop, and his own sandalled feet for the saint." There was never¹ any assumption of sanctity about him, but the good man had a kind of natural dignity of carriage, and a mien which carried with it the beauty of holiness whether he would or no ; add to which, he had a penetrating yet gentle look, a clear skin, a good eye, and something in his general aspect that was very engaging. Though he took no more heed to his looks than a man of his age and profession was likely to do, yet Nature kept her own ; and the goodness of his aspect, which spare living improved rather than impaired, was the true counterpart of the disposition that dwelt within. He was wont, by reason of his constant prayerfulness, wherever he sate,

¹ We have no means of comparing this account with the life of Neot in the Cottonian Manuscripts.

unconsciously to hold his hands turned up on his knees ; as, indeed, I have read, was the habitude of another good man, to wit, King Oswald, who died praying for his enemies : whence the common and well known proverb, “ Lord, have mercy on their souls ! as quoth Oswald, falling to the ground.”

Holy Neot, being brought, at the king’s commandment, into the royal chamber, cried, “ My son, I am grieved to find you ill at ease ; they have acted indiscreetly to use the æder-seax¹ on the fourth day of the new moon, which, we have Archbishop Theodore’s word for it, is highly dangerous. However, our prayers may avert the evil consequences, as did those of good Bishop John in the case of the nun Coenberga. I had hoped to find you sufficiently at ease to take pleasure in hearing me read some portion of the manuscript of the venerable Bede, which you charged me to procure for you.”

“ Have you brought it ? ” cries the king, half raising himself on his couch ; “ begin at once then, if it liketh you ; for, if it doth not find me easy, it may leave me so. Let me look at it, and handle it a little, though I cannot read it.”

¹ Vein-knife, i.e. lancet, which they used very clumsily.

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Thereupon Neot took the book, which was a thick one, from his vest, and stepped with it to the king, who turned it over and over, and then gazed on it awhile, with much complacence; and I observed the contraction of his brow gradually disappear as he did so; nor did it return all the while Neot was with us. So precious is the love of letters, even though it be a love without knowledge, in its power of taking us out of ourselves.

The good Neot, after a little prefatory discouraging, commenced reading with great unction: the king insisting on his sitting upon a setl at his side. The outset I did not much note; there was somewhat, I remember, about the pains the venerable man had been at to secure information, orally and in writing; and much about the shape and size of this our island, its being stocked with game and fowls, grain, vines, and all manner of trees; and its being engirt with salt seas, containing seals, dolphins, whales, and all manner of fishes.

After this, came somewhat about the landing of Julius Cæsar; and this and that battle; and this and that heresy; and at length the writer behaved to tell how the Britons, fore preft by

their enemies the Picts and Saxons, (that's ourselves,) sent to Gaul to request aid of good Bishop Germanus. What followed was very favourable and edifying. It seems that it was about Lent, when the good Bishop came over; and he took advantage of that holy season to ply the people much with exhortations and sermons; inasmuch that they, pricked at heart for their ungodliness and departure from the faith, flocked in crowds to him to be baptized. A little rustic church was hastily erected of wattles and green boughs, in the midst of the camp; the soldiers were foremost among the newly converted; and, whereas they were of late the victims of despondency and despair, they now were, to a man, animated with faith and courage. The scouts announcing the immediate approach of the enemy, Germanus declared to the Britons that he himself would be their leader. He viewed the country round about, and drew up his inexperienced troops in a hilly field, still known as Maes Garmon, the field of Germain. A multitude of fierce enemies soon appeared, whom, as soon as Germanus descried, making for the field in orderly array, he instructed his men simultaneously to

repeat his war-cry, whatever it might be, in a loud voice, directly he should give the word ; and, the enemy advancing secure-like, as thinking to take them by surprise, the bishop thrice cried out "Hallelujah !" The hills immediately sent back the echo of his men's voices on all sides, which reverberated from rock to rock, and made it seem as though every cleft and chasm held its ambush of warriors ; nay, as though the very skies took up the cry : and the enemy, struck with sudden dread, and believing themselves hemmed in by an innumerable multitude, fled in disorder, casting away their arms as they went, that they might run the lighter. Many were swallowed up by the river which lay across their path, into which they madly cast themselves in their precipitate and witless flight ; and their spoils were gathered up by the Britons, who remained masters of the field, without the loss of a single man.

"I think, my son," says Neot, closing his book, "that, not to speak irreverently, here is one of the finest victories related in history, since Jehoshaphat went forth with his people against the army that was like the sand on the

sea-shore for multitude. And yet how little we hear it talked of now! Just because the Britons beat us, and we Saxons were beaten. May many such a victory as this,—undertaken, I mean, in the same faith and spirit,—be written in our annals.”

“And did the Saxons make head against them afterwards?” inquired the king.

“By no means,” returned Neot. “The man of God, having thus won the day by faith without force, settled the affairs of the island and established general tranquillity. He then left the country, followed by the blessings of a converted and grateful people. Is it not in Bede?”

“I wish I could beat the Danes as easily,” quoth the king. “I believe I might cry Hallelujah to them throughout the longest day, without making any impression on them.”

“Germanus did not cry Hallelujah to *them*,” returned Neot; “it was in a very different quarter, my son, that he looked to make an impression. We read, in Chronicles, of the sun’s ruddy shining on pools of water being made the instrument of salvation to a people that called on their God. Another time, a great

host was discomfited by the sound of a going in the tops of some mulberry trees."

"What was that other victory you were speaking of," interrupted the king, "that was obtained by a man with a long name?"

"Jehoshaphat, king of Judah," returned Neot. "A man of God obtained access to him, and bade him have no fear of the multitude that was coming up against him; 'for,' quoth he, 'the quarrel is not yours, but the Lord's. To-morrow morning, go down against them, as they come up by the cliff:—you will find them at the end of the brook, hard by the wilderness—and ye shall have no need to fight your own battle. You have kept unto God, and He will keep unto you. Stand still, when you have set yourselves in array, and ye shall see what is the manner of His salvation, when He takes a matter in hand.' So the king did as he was bidden. In the grey of the morning, he stood by the way-side overlooking his host, as it filed past him, twelve hundred thousand strong, in orderly array, every man hearty, faithful, and full of cheer; and, quoth he, 'Hear me now, O Judah, and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the Lord your God, and so shall ye be esta-

blished : believe also in His prophets, and so shall ye prosper.' And so then he placed in advance of them the fingers unto the Lord, who went forward praising the beauty of holiness ; and when the enemy came in sight, the fingers burst forth in a chorus that was re-echoed by twelve hundred thousand men, ' For His mercy endureth for ever !' With one accord fled their enemies. Happy the land that has a godly king !"

" And happy the king, Jew or Christian," rejoins King Alfred, " that has the Lord for his God. If I ever obtain any considerable advantage over these poor pagans, for as evil as they be, I will baptize every head of them, and stand sponsor for them myself. I would sooner they were converted than confounded."

* * * *

Another time, I remember the king said he should like his people to hear the Scriptures read in their own tongue, at every market cross ; nay, to be able to read them for themselves, beside their own hearths ; and he thought the time might come, though not in his days, yet sooner or later, nevertheless. Holy Neot and he argued this point at some length. If I went into their various discourses at large, I should

never have done. Also many of his briefer and more familiar colloquies with myself are all in my heart, but need not to be set down, save here and there by the way. For example, I remember expressing unto him one day my surprise that he was up and doing, so many hours in the twenty-four ; and said,—

“ How is it, my brother, that you need sleep so little ? ”

After a moment's thought, he replied, “ Perhaps, because I eat so little ! ”

“ But how is it you need to eat so little ? ”

“ Perhaps, because I drink so little ! ”

“ But how is it you need to drink so little ? ”

“ Perhaps, because I think so little ! ”

But I laughed, and said, “ Ah, my king, that answer will not stand. ”

Then he said, “ You have reason, my sister. They who would have much thought, much wisdom, much knowledge, much holiness, must sleep little, eat little, drink little, and, moreover, talk little of foolish matters : howbeit, to talk with such men as Neot and Plegmund is nearly or quite as good as reading wiselike books. Hold it for sooth, Ethelfleda, that we Saxons commonly feed too heavily, women as well as

men: and, if you would neither sleep heavily, nor pray heavily, nor have heavy eye, heavy tongue, heavy thought, heavy heart, nor heavy foot, continue to fare as lightly as you do now. And this I say," added he, laughing, "not out of regard to saving my bread and cheese!"

It is not to be thought strange of me, that I should dwell somewhat at large on the history of this winter, which, for happiness and unhappiness, was the most eventful of my whole life. I read and studied much under the king's chaplains, and learned by rote many long Saxon and Latin poems, both sacred and secular; to wit, some of Bede's hymns and epigrams, Aldhelm's Acrostic in hexameters to the Abbess Maxima; certain portions of his poem wherein he describes and lauds forty-four female characters, who led single lives; a few rhymed hexameters addressed to Boniface by an Anglo-Saxon lady, named Leobgitha, and chiefly remarkable, I think, for being written by a woman; some verses by Cœna, which rhyme in the middle of each line—an ingenious trick, and no more; some much prettier and simpler rhymes to Aldhelm, by a pupil who loved him much, running thus,—

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“Vale, vale, fidissime,
Phile Christi charissime,
Quem in cordis cubiculo
Cingo amoris vinculo.”

Also that pleasing religious sonnet of Alcuin's, beginning,—

“Qui cœli cupit portas intrare patentes;”

and another on death, beginning, “O mortalis homo,” which I admire as much now as I did then; but, prettiest of all, his address to his cell, on leaving it for the world. I think his description of his reluctance to leave that peaceful retreat—embowered in lilies and roses of his own planting, with apple-trees in blossom, full of singing-birds, and with meadows gently sloping to the water-side, spread with fishermen's nets, and shut in by a little wood—had something to do with my falling in love with the idea of a religious life.

I also read the Song of Judith, the life of St. Cuthbert, and of sundry pious women . . . a little, but not much of the Bible, which I have since deeply regretted I was not then put in the way of reading more of. But I read whatever my tutors chose for me: at first, chiefly to please the king; and afterwards, to relieve my mind of

certain dull thoughts and ufeless wifhes, for which, indeed, there is no remedy like ftudy.

If I were to mention all the good offers of marriage I had during this winter at court, you, whoever you may be, who are now reading this Chronicle, would certainly be furprifed. In truth, I never had a grain of vanity in my compofition; or elfe, when I have heard other women bragging among themfelves of their diftinctions in this particular, (women profefling religion, too, I give you my word for it!) I fhould have told them oftener than I have done, that, an' if I were fo minded, I could outboaft them all. I make it a matter of confcience never to believe fuch perfonal details, be they narrated never fo modestly; and therefore fhall certainly never expofe myfelf to the humiliation of having my own word doubted, veracious as it is. There is a kind of madnefs, I wot, among a great many women in this refpect: they feem quite forgetful that the whole fum of the matter is, they have done the beft they could for themfelves, or what they thought the beft at the time. Every barber prates not; every maiden mates not; Ethelfwitha and the king gave me credit for being much more attached to the memory of

the late Earl of Berks than in sooth I was ; albeit I esteemed him far more dead, than I ever had done living ; seeing, by the comparison of him with all my other suitors, what his uncommon merit must have been ; and as I had not thought him good or winsome enough to care much about, save freondlic,¹ it was probable I might look about me from Hokeday to Yule, without finding one who pleased me better. It may possibly be asked, why I did not espouse Earl Ofric, now that he had succeeded to his brother's estate and dignity ? If such an inquiry should indeed by any possibility suggest itself, I may make answer that Earl Ofric had turned out quite differently from what many people had expected of him. This youth, like many another, was one of those nuts that have a very indifferent kernel. Albe he could scarce tell his stæfenrow,² yet, by reason of his goodly person and carriage, he had, by the late King Ethelred, been prematurely made *miles*, and invested with a purple garment and gold-sheathed sword. I think Absalom the son of David could not have been more conceited upon it, nor made a more pitiful use of his outward recommendations.

¹ Like a friend.² Alphabet.

He took the lead among the youths who set up for poor imitations of Alfred, aping the semblance while they missed the substance, and making many a poor silly maiden as true an idolater in her heart, as any of our old benighted forefathers, who worshipped wigs.¹ Howbeit, it was not by aping the trick of his speech, nor the fashion of his gait, nor yet by parting their hair evenly down the middle, and letting it diffuse itself gracefully over their shoulders, nor yet by wearing two-forked beards, that they had any chance of being mistaken for King Alfred. They had better have slept under fewer bedd-reaffes, and have left them sooner in the morning, and have eaten less, and drunken less, and studied more, and prayed more, if they had meant to be like him. However, I am wasting my time by writing about Earl Ofric, who, in sooth, has little or nothing to do with my story. Short confessions, few comments: suffice it to state, that the lady he took to wife this winter was of merit commensurate with his own, which some people even then thought very little. Had I Ethelfled been cognizant of the reasons on which they grounded this opinion at the time, it

¹ Idola.

might have saved me some disappointment; but, —too late we cry out, “Had I wist there was a wolf-pit.” Young people should always have the truth told them quite simply, when circumstances permit it; which is oftener than many old folks think. To a woman of my reflection, it appears quite evident—I say not whether or no it is the fruit of experience—that a young girl is extremely likely to get rid of an unfortunate affection, much sooner than she would do otherwise, if her good mother talk it over with her quietlike, and freondlike, without acrimony. Otherwise, her heart consumes itself, or, if she be not of a close turn, she seeketh the comfort of some friend, who is, perhaps, facen-leas;¹ or, it may be, of her maid.

If it be asked, where was my mother at this time? I reply, that she had been summoned home somewhat suddenly, about Yule-tide, to nurse my father in the foot-ail;² and that during her previous sojourn at the court, she had been much more occupied about Ethelfwitha’s infant than about her own youngest daughter. And hereupon I, the abbess of a religious house, must and will say what will doubtless be highly

¹ Deceitful; a maker of lies.

² Gout.

offensive to every married woman who comes to hear of it, and this for the sake of the younger persons of my own sex, who may, it is just possible, benefit by it, while I shall reap nothing but obloquy. . . . I, Ethelfled, declare and aver, that babies are all very well in their place, which is the cradle; but that innumerable mothers do, in toying with them and incessantly supervising them, notoriously neglect their duty to their older daughters, their growing and just grown up girls, to whom no one else can supply their place; whereas their place in the nursery may be very well filled by the foster mother and maids of the chamber.

Had my wife and good mother been at hand and at leisure to see whither the course I was taking would end, I Ethelfled might have been spared the shedding of some salt tears; as it befel, I took my own path, seeing my way very little before me; refusing this good match and the other, till, one day, I was a little stunned by hearing my sister, in reply to the expressed surprise of the noble lady Adeleve that the lady Ethelfleda did not marry, quite composedly make answer that I preferred going into a nunnery. It had never struck me before that I must do either the

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one or the other, and it took me so by surprise that I had not a word to proffer, but I could think of nothing else all the following night. I had of late taken much pleasure in reading of the good people recorded in Bede, their pious lives and almsdeeds, and their being from time to time carried up to heaven in a trail of glory, with celestial singing, like holy Chad, or like that Kentish maid who heard the angels say one to another, "We have come to fetch the little gold piece." I had mused how Erkengota, niece of the abbess of Brie, lay a dying, when those who were nursing her heard the sound as it were of a great unseen multitude entering the monastery, and soon after, just as she breathed her last, heard most transporting music ascending into the air and gradually dying away; and how, on looking out, they perceived, or thought they perceived, the night to be lighter than common, with somewhat of a milky path fading away. Also, of that sweet nun, called Edith, in the monastery of Barking, that was so beloved by a little boy, who, by reason of his tender age, was bred up among the sisters. He, dying of the plague, eagerly called out thrice, when in the article of death, "Edith! Edith! Edith!"

which convinced all who heard it that her time would be short; and, in truth, she sickened out of hand, and dying the same day, followed the little innocent who had called her, into the heavenly country. Also, how another sister of the same community called to those about her deathbed to put out the light; and, on their neglecting to do so, said unto them, "Well I wis you think me raving, but I can tell you that I see this house filled with so glorious and heavenly a beam, that your candle, in comparison with it, is but darkness!" And how another, named Tortgith, who for nine years had been sore bested, had a vision of a woman wrapped in a fair linen cloth, drawn gently upwards by golden cords; which was explained soon after by the good abbess dying.

These and such-like tales, I say, I had mused over and delighted in, and believed with a heartier faith than, perhaps, I can boast now; and sometimes, when vexed or saddened by this or that cross, I had bethought me, how good and blessed a thing it must be to be shut in and hidden away from a naughty world, and to be in peace and quietness for ever. But this had been all in a vague and general way; and betokened

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more impatience of my present yoke, than capability or vocation for one far heavier ; therefore, when the alternative was sudden-like presented to me in all its awfulness, it is little wonder that I lay awake, as I have already said, all the night. What stung me was, that Ethelfwitha should appear to think the matter so simple, and have so quietly settled it in her mind to be contented therewith. I wondered whether it were the same with Alfred the king, or whether he would be very much surprised and grieved to hear such a thing mentioned. It occurred to me whether I should not at once show I had a mind of my own, by quietly consenting to espouse one of my many suitors ; but, on reviewing them in my mind, one after another, it appeared to me that no conventual retirement could be so nauseous as to pass the remainder of my days with any one of them ; besides which, I had, with the openness of an honourable woman, made each of them perceive himself to be so disagreeable to me, as that I could not now, with any show of consistency, call them back. These reflections occasioned my pillow to be wetted with some hot tears ; and I ended, when day brake, by resolving to trust a little longer to what chance

might bring forth, in the hope that some foreign prince or other, equal to all I thought a husband ought to be, might yet appear at court. Just to see, however, how Alfred the king would take it, I contrived in a day or two, as if by accident, to let fall the words, "When I go into a nunnery." To my no small mortification, he gravely and calmly answered, "If such be indeed your final resolution, Ethelfleda, I can have nothing, certainly, to say against it; but, on the contrary, should recommend your withdrawing a little more from the secular pleasures which must needs be distasteful as well as hurtful to you, and to take all the means in your power, which at present are very great, to pursue those studies and duties which will, hereafter, make the sum of your happiness. Tell me, however, are you quite avised, young as you are, of having chosen well, and of knowing your own mind? Our laws are very gentle towards women, and very careful of them—they may possess, inherit, and transmit their lands at their own free will; they may sue in courts of justice; they may sit in the Witena-Gemot and Shire-Gemot; they may marry at their own choice after fourteen, and they can only be devoted to reclusive lives at

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their own free will. But, if our laws render them independent of their friends' control, our customs give them the benefit of their friends' advice and judgment. Do nothing precipitate, my sister. . . . Are you quite sure of your own mind in this matter?"

But I wiped away a tear, and would not say.



BOOK IV.

IT came to pass after Yule, that there set in a grievous frost. Before the frost, there was a heavy fall of snow, under which many men, women, and huts lay yburied. Is it not written in the annals of Alfred the king? ¹ Thereupon came forth the wolves, stepping so warily in each other's foot-marks, that on the snow could be seen but the track of one. They trotted along the skirts of the forests, bounded across the narrow roads, without leaving a single footprint, and made for lone houses and scattered thorps. Then they stopped, listened, and snuffed the air. The shepherds, watching their flocks by night, could only keep them off by great fires. If they were heavy to sleep, and suffered their fires to decay, the wolves fell on them, and destroyed

¹ Some unusually hard winters, about this time, are recorded.

them with their flocks. What, to them, were pens? they would leap over walls eight feet high. If they found horses within their sheds, they would attack them on the haunches; if oxen in their straw-yards, they flew at their throats. They ravened on many men, women, and children. They dug up the dead in many churchyards. They made no noise. If one of their young ones emitted a cry, they bit him; they dragged him by the tail, till he learned to hold his peace. When they had gorged themselves, and were filled, they retreated as they came, with one ear thrown backward, one in advance, their muzzles low, their eyes burning like fire, their bushy tails obliterating their traces as they swept the ground. When they got to the wood-side, they would face about and howl like Danes. "Sayth the cub, I am now under cover."

Sometimes one wolf would come in advance, and give a whining cry outside the stakes to tempt one of the hundas¹ to come forth. Oft they suspected the artifice; at other times a dog would be unable to restrain himself from springing over the pales. Then there would ensue a

¹ Hounds.

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dreadful yell, and he would be rent in pieces of all the pack.

Alfred the king hunted much, both in autumn and winter. He paid a penny for every wolf's brush. He was glad to put money in poor men's pouches, the times were so bad. He hunted harts, boars, reindeer, and now and then a bear. Those who were craft-like in snaring deer in nets, he sometimes rewarded with a horse or a bracelet. Every man, save on Sundays, might hunt in the woods, if so be he interfered not with the king's hunting. Thus many of the poor were fed. When the ground became hard and the scent did not lie, much small game was taken by the hand, stupid with the cold. Also the king distributed many bushels of grain, many ambra of malt, many wagon-loads of billets and twigs, that the people might be both warmed and fed. Nevertheless, as will always be the case, some were dissatisfied. And of these, certain complained unto Neot that they were neglected in the daily ministrations. Then Neot came and stood before the king; and his righteous face was red, and, saith Neot, "Why do you wrap yourself in your misconduct? why are you powerful but in injustice? You

have been exalted, but you shall not continue: you shall be bruised like the ears of wheat. Where will then be your pride? If that is not then brought low enough, it soon shall be. You shall be deprived of that very dignity, whose powers you so much abuse."

Saith the king, "My father, what words are these which proceed out of your mouth? Whose ox have I taken? what widow have I oppressed? or what poor man have I ground to powder? My purse is not bottomless; I wish it were fuller; howbeit, in this matter you seem misinformed."

Quoth Neot, "I have not been misinformed. There are certain, O king, that have been neglected in the daily ministrations. You lie soft, and you eat as much as it liketh you, and you delight yourself in being a king, and hear not the cry of them that have no helper. Therefore look to it, or believe in my word, that you shall be deprived of that kingdom in which you are swelling, hunted from one covert to another like a fox or a hare. Howbeit, if you repent in time, you shall find mercy." Thereunto the king made no answer, and Neot withdrew himself from him, warm in his wrath.

As the cold increased, trees were split by it ; bread must be thawed and chopped ere it could be eaten ; water yfroze in the outpouring, and stood on end like an icicle ; fish froze in the rivers ; the warm blood froze in our veins.

We of the spinning-side kept house. At night, there was much feasting. The harp went round, and every man sang his lay or told his tale. Some told of bear hunts and boar hunts ; some of wolves and foxes that talked ; and of serpents that could feign to be human, and slip in and out of their skins. Also of gold-hunters, in some strange land, that journey on camels to a place where gold is dug by ants as big as dogs, with feet like unto the feet of grasshoppers. The men leave the camels for the ants to devour, and, while they are at their feast, the men take the gold. Also of the pepper-gatherers, who find the pepper guarded by serpents, that must be scared from it by fire ; and thus the pepper becomes black. Is it not written in a book ? Therefore it must needs be true.

Elfric the thegn sang a song, which became very popular at court, and even in the streets. He had it of Tinne the Cornishman, son of Tredulf of Tintagel ; of whom we speak in the

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proverb, "As sweet as one of the songs of Tinne." The substance of it was this:—

"In the days of old judge Eli, came king Brute unto our shores. He was grandson of Ascanius, Eneas' only son. Then our land was full of bears, of beavers, and of boars. Then men multiplied among us till the island was o'errun. They had need of many things, I wis, we cannot bear to lack. But these poor swains ne'er missed them, so hardly were they bred. They had cattle, but no money. They were used their corn to stack i' the ear, and only threshed out just sufficient for their stead. In course of time came Cæsar, to rob them of their land. What! had he not already subdued lands enow? He must come and plant his standard upon our yellow strand! But the poor, untutored Britons rushed boldly on the foe. Yea, right into the water they rushed with one accord, and gave their naked bodies to the arrow and the sword. One mind there was among them; they drove him to the main. And what those Britons then did, may we not do again? Up, cnihts!¹ and with one heart! Destruction to the Dane!"

¹ Lads.

No man told his tale and fung his lay better than Alfred the king. Also his proverbs and pithy sayings, are they not in everybody's mouth? There is no need, I wis, to write them in a book. Peradventure many of them will be in use, when it shall be forgotten who made them.

The Prince of Wesssex came to court. He, too, sued for my hand; but he was ceorl-like,¹ and had no stæfen-craft. I heard him tell the king that I started off at the first word, like a young deer from a gad-fly.

When it came to be currently reported that I was minded to profess, the priests came about me like bees; while my lovers and suitors fell off from me, as though I were too holy to come nigh. The two chaplains ascribed my call to themselves, and nailed me down to it, or ever I well wist whether I had one or not. For this cause, and for none other, I have never, even unto this day, felt unto them quite freond-like. Whereas I had overmuch made a show of setting light by the world, perhaps to give a little pain (which he never felt) unto one who lived in it, I was now fore bested to find me taken at my

¹ Vulgar.

word, and thereon I shed many salt tears. The priests said, my ghostly enemy, witting his time was short, was having a last struggle with me, and that God loved a reluctant sacrifice. If so, I wis He loved mine. They made me think it true; and, albeit Ethelfwitha put it to me, even weeping, whether I were prepared for all that lay before me, and told me sundry tales of nuns' lives I did not then believe, I still held on, but I was fore betoft. Then began I to question in mine heart why one woman should be a queen, and another a nun? Howbeit, whenas these moodful thoughts had reached their highest, and I was nigh minded to forego the cloister, Eadwulf arrived with horses and with spearmen to carry me home, because that my mother lay sick, and, as it seemed, a dying.

There is no need for me Ethelfled to rehearse in detail the several graces of this my blessed mother; she being renowned throughout the length of Mercia and the breadth of it for her prayerfulness and largeness of heart. When the eye saw her, the heart blessed her: on the tongues of the poor was her praise. When I heard how she lay sick, I was pricked at the heart to think how I had of late been trifling

with heaven ; and I stole into the chapel a little before matins, and vowed a vow, that if it would please the Lord to heal my blessed mother, I would wholly dedicate myself a *willing* servant to the Lord.

Now, because my mother's need was urgent, I tarried little in setting forth. Eadwulf rode beside my bridle, full silent, till we had cleared the first long forest ; for a bear had been tracked, albe we thought it must be a tame one scaped from a bear-warden, they were so seldom known in those parts. When we reached the first down he spake ere I spake unto him, which was unmannerlike, but well meant ; and saith Eadwulf, " Of a verity, mistres, my meowla¹ will be fain to weep at what is held for sooth in the great city. . . . I heard it, for as short a time as I tarried. Oh, lady, lady, every stroke of the muffled bell that shall toll for thee, will knell in our hearts ! How little thou wittest of what lies on the hither and thither side of that wall of separation ! ' Ye see me but half,' quo' the gate-post."

But I bade him hold his peace ; so he fell back, like a chidden hound. Then I relented, and sought news of my mother, and held speech with

¹ Familiar word for wife.

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him of long time. Then we rode till nightfall, mostly in silence, and tarried at a thane's house; and we journeyed all the next two days.

Now when I saw my mother's deathful face, I repented not my vow, but renewed it full fervently; and thereafter she began to amend. But before I could see of this travail of my soul, I had a more immediate savour and relish of peace than I had known of long time. My mother, deeming herself at point to die, made her will; I supporting her in mine arms all the time; and, albe her provisions were needful that season, I marvelled at and loved her for her great heart therein made manifest. For, not alone devised she her morgen-gift unto my father, and this and that basin and chalice to this and that church, and such and such heall währifts and setl hragel¹ to Ethelwitha, and so many scencing cuppan² and silver dishes to the king, besides tokens of remembrance to this and that friend, as buffalo horns, cups of bone, and brazen dishes; but she took heed to the eldest of her slaves; as on this wise—Let Ebba be freed, on condition she abide with my daughter Ethelfleda; and let Urfried be freed, and go whithersoever she listeth;

¹ Hall-hangings and seat-covers.

² Drinking-cups.

Wynric and his wife, and Spror; and let the sister of Tidulf be freed. Wite-theows¹ she had none to release; my blessed mother! After this she washed, and caused herself to be clad in long white funeral garments; then she confessed, and received the holy communion; so that nothing remained but for us to place her, after her decease, just as she was, in her coffin. Then she, with fatigue overwhelmed, fell back upon her bolster; and we with hoppscytan² and a goat-skin covering warmly covered her o'er; and her breaths grew deep and far between, as the sighs of expiring people commonly do; but, in place of their growing yet fewer and more faint, she began anon to breathe more peaceful like, and presently fell into a deep sleep. Now I Ethelfled dismissed all her women save one. A great wax candle in a heavy candlestick burned at the foot of the bed. I lay down beside my mother, whileas Ebba fed the decaying fire with turf: and I kept staring at the candle, and thinking my mother's inward life was brighter, and I mused of the dying nun at Barking that bade them extinguish the taper; and or ever I wist, I fell on slumber, with the tears, I believe, yet on my

¹ Penal slaves.

² Sheets.

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cheek. Now, in this my sleep or trance, a dream was vouchsafed me,¹ not like that which caused Eliphaz the Temanite to fall a trembling, but that came unto my weary soul with I know not what to say of peaceful and refreshing, like unto the cool night air after a hot day, or the soothing of music that yet hath no distinct sound. Me-seemed to take up mine old dream in my sister's closet; in the loneliness and darkness of that locked-up garden, with its tangled weeds and sweet-smelling herbs growing unseen, all about me; and meseemed to be standing on the brink of that deep little pool. And I heard the key turn in the gate, and some one come in and lock it again and descend and stand by the pool; but mine eyes saw him not. Then a sense of awe overcame me, and a pleasing dread overshadowed me; yet I drew nigher unto him in place of falling back; for I felt I was helpless, and here was some one that could help: sorry-ful, and here was one pitied forrow: weary, and here was one could give me rest: and, leaning over the pool, I saw therein what I could not see in its own substance . . . the face of Jesus!

Thereupon my mother woke me with a kiss,

¹ "Dreams likewise" (among the Anglo-Saxons) "had their regular interpretations and applications."—SHARON TURNER.

and sayeth, "Ethelfleda, you are weeping in your sleep—are you in trouble, love?" But I said, "Oh no;" and she lay quiet, and methought, slept again, but she did not. Anon she saith in a hushed, calmful voice, "I have slept and am refreshed . . . I think my life is given unto your prayers . . . for I wis thou hast prayed for me, my daughter." I said, "Oh yes, my mother." Then she began, ever and anon, to question me of Ethelwitha, and likewise of myself. Her questions were very loving, but searching; and or ere I was aware, I felt mine heart drawn out unto her, and possessed her of every sorrow that lay in it. Her dear arm lay across me: I seem to feel it now. After long silence, "Child," quoth she, "you have been hardly entreated; and the more so that there is nothing whereon for us to take the fæth.¹ Were I thy father or thy brother, I might make a quarrel of it; but perhaps it is better as it is; for to what good could we stir in the matter? Words and looks are oft but the fruit of a false heart: we may value a man's life at his *were*,² but there is neither were nor wite for mind's peace. The owner of a mischievous dog may be fined; but they that bite and devour their

¹ Deadly feud.

² The pecuniary fine for homicide.

own kind go fac-lefs." Then said I, "Oh my mother, let us keep the grief hidden between you and me. In my bitterness I vowed a vow unto the Lord, and now keep it I must." Then saith she, "Oh child, what hast thou done? to speak unadvisedly with thy lips? The vow of a young maid in her father's house, vowed in mere sorrow of heart, need not stand." Then said I, "Oh my mother, I renewed it or ever I left the royal city. I went into the chapel just before matins, and kneeled upon my knees, and vowed that if your life should be lent unto us yet a season longer, I would wholly give myself unto the Lord." Then she sayeth, "I suppose such a vow as that must stand," And we both wept fore.

All this time, Ebba slumbered and slept; but now she awoke and renewed the bright beaming flame; and we two held our peace. Thereafter, my blessed mother, who was very weak, slept again; and I lay long awake, but slept at last; and when I slept, it was heavily and with no dream.

Whenas I awoke, I felt weary; and the cold, grey morning light was stealing in, and the air of the chamber was at once close and chill. But

my blessed mother was still asleep peaceful-like, and the two furrows had yfled that were on her brow ; and the words came into my mind, " She shall see of the travail of her soul, and be satisfied." Ebba was seeking, full stealthful, to revive the embers ; and I lay quite awake, but still ; feeling as though some great wrench had torn the quick flesh, bleeding, from the bone ; and as if a strong hand had turned my soul round about, from all the things wherein it had greatly delighted, towards a new prospect, with a strait path, closely hedged, running on to a thick cloud beyond. There was somewhat untruthlike¹ in it all ; but my mother's bettering was soothfæst enough.

About high noon, one of her women came in, and said the holy Neot had arrived with a token for her from the queen ; having ridden all the way, to make the more speed. He was admitted strait ; for my mother delighted greatly in his ministrations ; and, at this present, her soul was as subdued as a weaned child. He tarried with her long time ; prayed for her ; said how short and vain was life, how blessed was heaven, what exceeding love our Saviour had shewn in dying

¹ Unsoothfæst.

for us: and every word he spake, my mother's foul and mine drank up as dry and thirsty land drinketh up water, that soon indeed disappears from the surface, but only to sink down into it and make it fruitful.

My mother being at length heavy to sleep, the good Neot withdrew into another chamber; beckoning with the hand, that I should follow him. Then sought he more particular news of my mother, to bear unto Ethelswitha, and enquired of me when she began to amend. Also he spake words of peace unto myself, saying how great a blessing it was for my mother to have so good a daughter by her to abide at home and be her stay; and that my mission of usefulness, if less glorious in the sight of the world than that of my sister, was not so in the sight of God, who seeth not as man seeth. Thereupon my tears began to flow; and I did the holy man to wit how much too well he thought of me, and how I had been sore let in running the race that was set before me; but that now I began to see my way plainer; only I distrusted my strength to hold on to the end, and should be thankful to him for his prayers. These he promised me; and he went on to speak of things heavenly with such sweet-

ness, that I was drawn on to tell him of all my little difficulties—my *great* difficulties would be the truer word and of my dream overnight ; and I asked him if he thought there were anything in it. Thereon he smiled a little ; which I then thought, and think now, so good a man should not have done ; for was it not unto me a serious matter ? Young persons may ask unwisely questions ; but, so be they are docile and anxious to be set right, they should be treated with gravity and judgment. Howbeit, the good Neot sat silent for a season, wrapped within himself, and then said, “ There are sundry ways in the which divine instruction and comfort may be and have been imparted : and we know that visions have aforetime been vouchsafed unto believers, to direct and strengthen them in their need. Doubt not, therefore, my daughter, but freely believe, that this dream of thine, even if the offspring of thy foregone turn of thought, hath something of profitable and spiritual in it. Why shouldest thou have felt that great delight in the unseen presence of Jesus, if thou wert not one of His little flock ? His sheep know His voice, but it only scares the goats. Why should you have heard His voice in the garden without

being afraid, if you had been eating forbidden fruit, and would not have Him know it? Your soul is, in sooth, His garden; full of weeds, no question, and of unpruned flowers and unripened fruits; but we know what those fruits are: love, joy, peace; longsuffering, gentleness, goodness; faith, meekness, temperance. If we are aware that these fruits have taken root in us, and are growing, however imperfectly, we can, with humble assurance, invite the Master of the garden to come and behold His pleasant fruits; and we must not take it amiss if He pruneth pretty freely those branches which are running to waste, since He only so doth that they may bring forth more abundantly. As concerning your deep still well . . . the heart is, we know, a well of sweet water or bitter: as bitter as Marah till the Lord casts in the righteous branch. Then it obtains His own sweetness; and oh! well for us, my daughter, when He comes down by the secret path that no man knoweth, and, taking us at unawares, finds His own image reflected in the shady pool! May He so find it with each of us, so often, that His frequent steps shall wear a little track, known only to Him and to us!"

Furthermore he said, "What manner of jour-

ney hadst thou, my daughter?" I said the way was long, and cold, and rough, and in many parts dangerous. We tracked a bear, and feared the wolves, and had much ado to cross the rivers, which were half thawed, half frozen; howbeit, I scarce noted all the terrors of the way, I so longed to see my mother's face. As soon as I reached my father's house, all my perils, all my panics I forgot. "Thus will it be," quoth he, "in the heavenly country, when you reach your Father's house. You will scarce note the present perils of the way, if you long to look Jesus in the face."

Then he told me the following parable. "A little girl was once sent to market with a basket of eggs. On her return she found the floods had risen and the bridge was carried away. While she stood weeping beside the torrent, a tall pine snapped in twain, and fell across from one bank to the other. Thereupon suddenly appeared unto her a man of most beautiful countenance, who said, 'Child, why weepest thou? what seekest thou?' She said, 'Oh, my lord, the bridge is broken, and I cannot reach my father's house.' The stranger saith, 'A pine has fallen from side to side, thou mayst cross on

that.' The child saith, 'Sir, the stream is deep, and flowing very fast; my head will spin, and I shall fall in.' The stranger saith, 'Give me thine hand; as long as thou holdest unto me, I will uphold thee. Look stedfastly on my face, look neither to the right nor to the left, and I will lead thee across.' The child stretched forth her hand, and looked stedfastly in his face, which waxed more and more beautiful every moment; and though she was strongly tempted, when she heard the waters raging vehemently, to look now to the right side, now to the left, she never did; and they won safe across."

Furthermore he said, That one reason which inclined him to think that my dream in my sister's closet had come, not from within but from without, directed by some superior intelligence, was that some of the ideas in it were unchildlike, and would not have originated with myself. What should I have known of the heart's bitterness, or of the spiritual conflicts of the poor maid? Thereat, I interrupted him, and said I had remembered, afterwards, having heard Ebba scoffing at the terrors of Æthelice, in the hearing of my mother, and calling them vain shadows; whereon my mother had checked

her by saying that whileas they lasted, they were no vain shadows to her. Good Neot fell a musing of this; and presently said, that if all were as ingenuous as myself, and regarded not the dispelling of things seemingly marvellous by telling the exact truth, he wist that several things would be to be accounted for that now passed for miracles, and by their puerility and inconsequence brought discredit on those that were truly such.

He added, he had once had a dream that had much strengthened and comforted him, albe it was not so pretty as mine : peradventure because he was neither young nor pretty himself. He was tending of a sick friend, of whose state of grace he was by no means certain ; and during his night-watch, when he ought to have been alert, he, like the poor, distressed disciples who so loved their master, fell a sleeping for sorrow. Thereon, he fancied he saw his friend trying to scale a ladder resting against something out of sight, yburied in clouds ; and seeing his friend like to fall, as though blind and dizzy, he cried out with all his might to him to hold on ; and would have stretched forth his own hand to save him, but had no power. Just as he thought his

friend was going to fall into perdition, and could hardly endure to watch him, a hand from the cloud above was put forth and drew him safely up. "And albe," quoth Neot, "you might say that this vision was no other than the fruit of mine own previous and anxious thought, I affirm to thee, daughter, that it comforted me long afterwards."

In discourse like this, the good Neot quite took away, for that season, all lingering bitterness and reluctance from mine heart; and, continuing his communion with me from time to time, he led me onwards, step by step, and helped me here and there over rugged places, so that I never stumbled nor drew back. His great engine was the love of Jesus; not mine for him, but His for me, which indeed did as it were constrain mine own. And when other matters called my good teacher away, I found that albeit I had lost a stay I much missed, I could now with timid steps walk alone. One good I was to him indebted, was the method of life I now had formed, which so filled all my time that I had no leisure for *mod-seocnesse*.¹ Alfred the king, who by reason of the pagans having conveyed themselves into the north so soon as the

¹ Mood-sickness: sickness of mind.

frost brake up, had yet a lengthened season for bringing to pass such things as liked him,¹ and setting aside such things as liked him not, was zealously minded to promote the stæfencræft as well of clerics as lah-men. For whereas of late there had been few ecclesiastics below the rank of bisceopa, on this side the Humber, who understood the service of the church, or could turn Latin into English, he was purposed that, if not all the ceoal-like, at least all the ranlike throughout the realm should have some knowledge of letters; many men who should know better, being obliged, as at this time, to sign their wills with the sign of the cross, *pro ignorantia literarum*. Well hath he, the good king, written of later time, concerning the sadness of a soul benighted :

Oh ! in how grim,
In how bottomless a pit,
Laboureth the bedarken'd mind,
When it the stormy
Tempests beat
Of the world's business !

Forasmuch as *then* it is we find ourselves at fault, and too late lament our ignorance. And again ;

¹ "I, Alfred, cyning, have gathered together many of those things our fathers held, which liked me; and have thrown aside many of those which liked me not."—Exordium to Alfred's Laws.

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Oh ! thou Creator
 Of the pure stars
 And of the earth and heaven,
 Thou that on heah-setle
 Ever fitteſt,
 And the ſwift heavens turneſt !
 Oh ! who on earth
 Obey thy commandments
 As ſome do in heaven ?
 Man, man alone
 Againſt thy will
 Evermore worketh !

So rihtwiſe a king, diſtruſtful of himſelf, and continually ſeeking the good of others, was likely to have the bleſſing of Heaven on his deed. Much he laboured, not alone by ſchools and colleges to promote ſtæfencræft, but likewiſe to ſpread the knowledge of the holy Scriptures by multiplying copies. And, becauſe that the labour of tranſcription was great, and the labourers few, he was purpoſed that even religious women ſhould aſſiſt in the work ; and had already opened his mind to me on the expedience of inſiſting much on the poyntel-cræft¹ of the holy virgins that might hereafter to my care be committed. To pleaſe him and edify myſelf, I now ſpent much time, both in tranſcription of Latin and Saxon, and in copying of illuminated initials

¹ Penmanſhip. See Wickliffe's Bible, " And he axed for a poyntel."

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and borders, with colours of red, blue, and yellow ; but my materials were exceeding bad, nor had I as yet seen any good models, therefore my labour was not purpose-like or effective ; albeit, it seemeth me as much pleasure accrues to the performer of an indifferent as of a superior work, if so be he is satisfied with himself. This labour I could pursue in my mother's chamber ; and she, being too feeble for much speech, and having great respect for those that were clericic, did peaceably lie, with pillows underfette,¹ her eyes fixed on me and her hands folded, as if in the article of saying *Nunc dimittis*. Thus I transcribed much of the psalter, and figured it as I went along with representations of trees, rivers, men, birds, and beasts, outlined with red ink, and filled up with the best colours I could find or make. Each night I read to my blessed mother and her women, the portion I had transcribed during the day, and commented thereon to the best of my poor power ; whereby I could discern that I was, without yseeking it, silently gaining of them the reputation of a young saint. This was very peacifying unto me, and went some way towards counterpoising the chief griev-

¹ Propped up.

ance I now had in my mind, which proceeded from the cause following.

When my mother first fell sick, there cometh twice or thrice from the king's royal court, sumpter horses, well guarded with spears, and laden, by the bounty of Ethelfwitha, with grain, wine, cakes, cracknels, spices, comfits, pepper, and, in fine, every dainty my mother could need, and every remedy, methinks, that could be in the book of Bald the Laece.¹ Inſomuch that my mother bade her ſtay her hand, for ſhe was by her goodneſs overſtocked, as well with things that would as would not decay, and provoke the greedineſs of mice, rats, and weevils. Therefore the ſumpter horſes came no more; and the lateſt envoy having the news that my mother was well to ſpeed with him ycarried, Ethelfwitha of a certainty made up her mind that ſhe was quite healthfulic, which was far off from the truth. From that ſeaſon we had no note nor ſignal of her remembrance of us, which troubled us full fore. Of a truth, we were ſet at a great diſtance from the royal city; but kings and queens have ſo many men and horſes at their

¹ Bald the Leech wrote a medical treatiſe about the time of Alfred, containing two or three hundred preſcriptions.

beck, that a handful of them might, certes, have been well bestowed in doing us to wit that they sometimes bear in mind we were in the land of the living. Howbeit, we were overlooked of long time; and when, at length, some token reached my mother, there was no question for myself, no more than if I had for years in a cloister been yburied. This smote me at the heart; and when, of later time, I spake of it to Ethelswitha, she put it off lightly with, "Oh, we married women" . . . which made the matter not better but rather worse, I'm bethinking!¹ For, if married women have more businesse and pleasures than those that, unwed, nigh the hearth twirl sadly the long flax, they ought of their lonely sisters to be the more mindful. Soon I found, that whenas my thoughts went in this direction, my heavenly comforts faded: for that cause, after one or two fore conflicts whereof none others wist, I gat much unto prayer, and unto reading and transcription, grinding colours, steeping and scraping of parchments; and, though much of my labour was in one sense wasted, yet the demon was cast out. Also, about this time, my father returned from his

¹ Ynbethincan, to bethink one's self.

attendance on king Buhred, who was purposed to go beyond seas, leaving behind him Ethelwitha his queen, king Alfred's sister. My father was, by advancing money unto him and to king Alfred, much impoverished; and when my mother told him I was minded to profess, he cried, "What! my apple-blossom? I was purposed to give her unto the prince of Wessex; howbeit, he with another wyf himself hath provided, so that, it may be, all is best as it is; for that, or ere my youngest should wed much beneath my eldest, I would sooner see her a blot."¹ Also he was pleased to say that he had found it so expensive a pleasure to be kinsman to two kings, that he thought a third would have ruined him. I marvelled my father should take it thus easily, and was thankful he wist not I had repulsed the prince of Wessex; howbeit, his indifference and the neglect of Ethelwitha made me droop, which, my good mother noting, she would have it that 'twas from overcare of her; so to set her at ease, I told her my heart's grief, and she comforted me and told me she had been grieved too. Also, she told me how many excuses she had been able to make in her

¹ A sacrifice.

own mind for Ethelfwitha ; wherefore, after a few tears, I was able to go on my way peaceful-like, with still increasfing love for my blessed mother.

Howbeit, the bearer of the tardy love-token having returned to the royal city, there arriveth, some three weeks afterwards, (it being then the summer of the year of our Lord 873) a company of spearmen guarding a sumpter load of good things for my mother, and bearing an epistle ywritten in Ethelfwitha's name by Werefrith the chaplain. And the epistle signified that if my mother were now able to spare me, the queen was desirous of my immediate company. And whereas I, being still chafed, was minded to punish mine own self by refusing to go, my loved mother urged my ready compliance, and with my conflicting mind so ywrought, as that I started the next morning, royally attended. Now whereas my winter journey had been rough and dangerous, and performed with a troubled heart, the weather was now warm, and the air fresh, and the rivers fordable, and the husbandmen at work in the fields, and the wild beasts in their dens until nightfall. Therefore my spirit

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was glad and my heart rejoiced ; the more by token that I thought my prayer and my vow had gone some way to win me the grace of the life of my blessed mother ; and I had the fancy of somewhat good in store for me, I wist not justly what. Therefore the road seemed short and the journey delectable, albe it lasted three days. When we reached the royal city, it wanted about two hours of high noon ; and Alfred the king, just returned from trying some new German hawks, was standing at his gate, in his green hunting frock, surrounded by his ealdormen, gerefas, and thanes. His hair had partly escaped from its fillet ; and as he stood talking and laughing with his train, he looked like what he was, a king and the son of a king. He lifted me from off my horse, saying, " Ethelfled, you look as fresh as a rose !" and led me in, all smiling, to the queen. With her was Bald the physician, who in stead of retiring as he might better have done, from the first greeting of us two dear sisters, only stood aside, unmannerlike, and anon asked me how fared the earl my father. I said he had recovered from his foot-ail so wholly, as to have been on his duty to king Buhred. Thereupon he would

know what had healed my father so speedily. To him I replied that Gunfried had dieted him low, kept him cool, and given him mineral water from a spring of rare virtue. He repeated after me, "Low diet? kept him cool? mineral drinks? I am driven beside myself, oh lady, to hear of such senseless proceedings. Do not we Saxons hate cold water? Is it suitable to our constitutions? This old woman might have been the death of your noble father by driving the ail from his extremities. Ye should have loaded him with bedd-reafes, have fed him high, and have given him my tried prescription: to wit, a penny-weight and a half of the dried heads of tuberoſe-iſis, which in the vulgar tongue we call greata-crauleac; half a penny-weight of pear-tree bark, Roman bark, and cummin; a fourth part of laurel berries, and ſix pepper-corns. All theſe you ſhould have ground to a powder, and added thereto two egg-ſhells full of good wine; and given him to drink thereof, until he got well."

Howbeit, my father had tried this remedy without ſucceſs, though I declared it not unto Bald; and, albeit Gunfried might, as the laece averred, have been his death, yet certain it is

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that under her care he became well. As say the common people, "No physicks more rare, than simples with prayer," so it had proved in this instance. A gilded pill is sometimes mortiferous. Flour of wheat, boiled in milk, hath healed the swelled knee of a faint.

About an hour before sunset of the same day, my women having uncorded my chest, I took therefrom the Psalter I had illuminated at my loved mother's bedside; and placed it, not without a little secret elation, in the hands of the king. Thereon he smiling and greatly content, called unto him Ethelfwitha, that they its contents simultaneously might behold. Now I with modesty looked another way; but anon, venturing to cast mine eyes to the king, I saw his eyebrows, which were very moveable, quickly uprise and decline again, and his mouth betray that he was making merry at my expense. Then my face became suffused, as if with the red colour of stibium;¹ and I said, "You have shamed me, my king." He said, "Thy shame be upon me, my sister! of a truth, to laugh at thee was unmannerlike, more especially for thy failing well to depict things thou hast never

¹ A rouge not unknown to the Anglo-Saxon ladies.

seen ; but indeed, Ethelfled, these waves of the Red Sea look like frætwungs,¹ and these clouds like dumplings. Neither wot I how these warriors should escape being fined, for carrying their spears so dangerously, nor why this giant's head should exceed in size his body, unless to be the better mark. But be not discouraged, my sister ; you need nothing but better teaching. Oh that I, in my boyhood, had in many things been better taught !” And, after a good deal more parley, that was delightful and praiseful, albeit that sudden smile once and again lit up his face, he saith, “ Have you ever heard of the famous gospel of St. Cuthbert, commonly known as the Durham Book ?”

I said I knew it had been transcribed and illuminated by the Bishop of Lindisfarne, a hundred years ago, and that he had been twenty-and-two years about it.

The king sayth, “ Sister, believe me, no great work was ever perfected in a hurry. It was by labour and patience that the bishop made his book worth a royal ransom. I have desired that mine eyes should see it, long time, but would not send spears and horses so far in

¹ The zigzag ornament so often seen in Saxon architecture.

troubled times, only myself to please ; nevertheless, now that it may profit you to see the book, I will send. It may be that the monks will lend it to me on pledge ; or on the word of a king." Thereafter he praised my delineations of herbs and flowers, my colours of red and of blue, and the smoothness of my parchments : howbeit, when I to my chamber retired that night, I was disturbed because that my limnings had made merry the king ; and was ready to wish that I had not showed them unto him. Then saw I how far the pleasure of executing a work of art exceedeth the pleasure of having it apprised by others when ywrought. For sympathy is pleasant, and praise is pleasant ; but the excellency of art is that it is allsufficient in itself. To conclude, I, Ethelfled, thus mused in my mind : "Thou, O king, hast many painful, many weariful hours ; and is it not a good thing that, even at mine own expense, I for a little should have made thee merry, my brother ?"

Now, behold, over and above the stuff contained in my brazen-bound chest, as gems and goodly raiment, I had brought along with me two goat-skin bags or pokes, well lined, and secured at the mouth, containing fundry matters ;

and herein, I blush to relate, I had, witeles, placed an embroidered purse, containing fifty-and-three mancusa of gold, a love-token from my mother unto Ethelfwitha. And when the bags came to be emptied, behold, the purse of gold was not therein ; and the suspicion of theft fell on Umfreig,¹ who had had the baggage in charge. Now, Umfreig was my father's cup-bearer. Full forry was I, therefore, that he of such villany should be accused ; but what could I do ? The los was Ethelfwitha's, not mine, wherefore, I was constrained to publish the matter. And because that it could not be brought home to him, and he would not confess, it was decreed that he should be tried by ordeal.

Now, on having his choice, whether of red-hot iron or of water boiling furiously, he decided on the latter, which some thought favoured of innocence, and others of audacious presumption. For me, I was ready to weep for him, being assured of his guilt ; albeit Wulfgyth, my woman, said somewhat scornfully, " Be at peace, lady, there are ways of seething without being hurt." Simon the priest took the direction of the whole.

¹ Humphrey ?

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For three days he kept the man in retreat, feeding him on bread and salt, bitter herbs and water; and thus brought his spirit low. On the third day, a fire was kindled within the church, and water set thereon in a copper vessel and made to boil, in the presence only of the priest and the accused. Then entered two men of either side, and agreed that the water boiled furiously; then an equal number of additional men of either side entered the church, all fasting, and ranged themselves on either side the ordeal. Then the priest sprinkled them with holy water and made each of them taste thereof; then they kissed the Gospels, and were signed with the sign of the cross. All this while the fire was not mended, and peradventure the water ceased boiling; else how should ensue what happened? A stone being cast into the pot, Umfrieg plunged his hand in after it and drew it out, while Simon the priest uttered an ejaculatory prayer, that the truth might be made manifest unto all men. The hand was wound up in a linen cloth and sealed; in that fashion it was kept for three days. At the end of that time, the seals were broken, the cloth was unwound; and the hand was found . . . whole! like as its fellow.

Now, here ensues the marvel. Umfrieg was afterwards detected endeavouring to pass one of the mancusa, which, unbeknown to him, was marked; and being taken in the manner, he confessed, and should have suffered death. Howbeit, his kinsmen redeemed him by paying his were, and the amount of the stolen treasure, besides giving borh for his future fidelity. Now, albeit he confessed his own guilt, he could not be brought to confess any collusion or deceit in the administration of the ordeal; albe Bald the physician, who was certified in his own mind that some outward application had hardened his hand, offered him monies and his mediation with my father, if he the same would reveal; alleging that the individual wrong would be greatly atoned for by the general benefit that would ensue therefrom. Not one word would he confess, that hardened Umfrieg! So Bald interceded not with my father: the office of cup-bearer was given unto Snel; and Umfrieg, after lying long in bonds, was cast forth, a feolun, that is to say, one who hath not a penny. In the old days, had he escaped with his life, he would have lost hand and foot. I think he

afterwards joined a hloth.¹ All this crime and forrow might I, Ethelfled, have prevented, had I locked the money in the oaken chest.

Now, save for this untoward event, my visit to the court as at this time was full pleasant ; but, in so far as others were concerned in it, completely secular. There was much to tell, much to hear : when I spake of taking the veil, no one seemed to hear me. Many people came and went : among the rest was the king of Northumbria's son, who came and did not go. He was winsome, clerclike, and could play well on the harp and rote. To my great surprise Ethelfwitha asked me if I would have him to my husband. I said no ; I was the bride of heaven, and dared not to think of an earthly spouse—it would be sin. She said that was nothing ; I had taken no vows, and was as yet unfettered ; but I knew I had taken a vow in my heart, as sacredly as if before the bisceopa at the altar. Howbeit I told her not, save in general, that I could not, nor would not, wherefore Ethelfwitha was on no wise to be blamed for that she bade the king to talk to me.

¹ A band of thieves.

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But it fell that ere he returned from the chase, I had the grace of a few hours to myself; and the end of my reflections was, that my Saviour must be all or nothing to me; that my word would not be worth an egg if I kept it not to him, albeit none else had wist it to be pledged; that there was much peace and much profit to be hoped for, if my life were hidden with Christ in God, that he could help me, and that he would help me through all trials, if so be I gave myself wholly to him; and that I could and that I would.

Therefore the king, when he had speech of me, found me firm as a rock, and after saying all that could be said on the matter as well as any one could say it, he came to a pause. Then quoth the king, "I never knew so steadfast a mind! go on thy way rejoicing, Ethelfleda! heavenly angels be thy speed! Noted shalt thou be among our holy women; and for all thou sayest, in thy too great modesty, of the uselessness of an unmarried woman's life, be secure it needs not in thy case to be so, but may be quite otherwise; for you may help me in my schemes greatly. I have store of high and holy work that none but one so pure, so gentle, so

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wifelike as thyself can do ; and I wit thou wilt do it well for me, my sifter."

Thereon, what could I do but kifs his hand, and then hafte away to the chapel and kneel down before the altar ? Happy, happy ! to wit that in giving myself wholly unto God, I might yet be useful to and find favour with the king.



BOOK V.

ALFRED the king sent a company of spearmen into the north,¹ to demand of the monks of Lindisfarne (who had found refuge in the monastery of Crayke) the loan of the Durham Book. And in pledge thereof, he sent his holy ring and golden circlet with gems yfette, for the said monks to have and hold until that he the book should restore. Were the time and place convenient, I would now relate the dangers these spears met with by the way, and the number of days their journey lasted; howbeit, they wonne back at length unto the royal vill, and with them brought the book, which the monks humbly prayed that the king of his mercy would neither dog's-ear nor deface. Now the king, being advertised that the book was at

¹ We must take this on Ethelred's authority, if at all.

hand, did instantly remit and set aside the matters he was then engaged in. And sending for the queen, and for me Ethelfled, that we his pleasure might partake, he spent the entirety of that afternoon, and much of sundry afternoons following, in contemplating with us the delineations and devices which had taken the good bishop of Lindisfarne twenty-and-two years to execute.

Now, when I saw what good limning might in very deed amount to, I apprised my own craftless attempts as meanly as the king himself could do—(howbeit he had never made merry with them again;) and with much zeal and application I set myself to copy as many of the borderings and initial letters in the Durham Book as time would allow, in colours of azure, and green, and violet, and yellow, and scarlet, and gold. For Werefrith the chaplain had learned the art of preparing gold for the illumination of manuscripts; and the way he did it was this. He filed the gold very finely, brayed it in a mortar with the sharpest vinegar¹ he could get, (which proved to be some home-made wine my loved mother had made of her

¹ Ecet: i.e. acetum.

own grapes, and sent to the king ; but we never did her to wit what it came to,) and whenas it turned black, he poured it forth. Then he added unto it some salt or nitre, which dissolved it and made it fit for use.

Also, for he was clever in little things, he wist how to prepare parchment much better than I had done ; and also vellum. His method with the first was this : he let it lie, by the space of three days, under lime ; then stretched it, scraped it well on either side, then dried it, and stained it of what colour it liked him best. It pleaseth me to wit how all things should be done, albeit some things it pleaseth me not to do.

About this time, my father brought to Winchester our royal lady Ethelswitha, queen of Mercia ; and then returned after a while to his duty on king Buhred, who was purposed he should accompany him to Rome ; his royal spouse was meantime to remain in the safeguard of her brother, king Alfred. Thus we had two queens, Ethelswithas, at court ; which some people peradventure thought one too many. Howbeit Alfred the king was always very kind unto his own cyth and cynn ; and thus it fell that Ethelswitha his sister lived upon him

many a day ; and when the troubles of the country increased, became no small burthen unto him. For this queen was one of those who, while for ever giving out that they are nobody, are yet always expecting to be treated like somebody. Howbeit, the king at length persuaded her to go into a monastery ; and I am thankful to say it was not mine.

Ethelswitha, that is to say my sister, had no need to fear the comparisons that could not fail to be made between her and the queen of Mercia ; there being as much difference between them as between fescue and cord-grafs.¹ For whereas my sister had always been of excellent beauty, there was now no woman equal unto her for fairness, in or about the court. And whereas the queen of Mercia's hair was of reddish yellow, and rather harsh, Ethelswitha's was of the palest brown, silky, and a marvel for length. And sometimes, for the greater state, she let it down to its full length, confined only by a circlet of pearls : but more commonly she put it up in shining coils, like Judith of Bethulia in the song ; whence the king would

¹ Cord-grafs is remarkably stiff and strait ; fescue affords excellent pasturage.

call her "the woman of the twisted locks." And whereas the queen of Mercia's eyes were of a cold grey colour, and somewhat too prominent, Ethelfwitha's were blue, with soft shadowings round about. And whereas the queen of Mercia did nothing from morn to night but exact service and talk like the foolish, Ethelfwitha was ever caring for others. And whereas the queen of Mercia always loved to be helped to the best, Ethelfwitha always helped her to the best. And whereas the queen of Mercia was full troublesome unto her brother,¹ and Ethelfwitha loved him as her own soul, it came to pass that the king wearied a little of his sister, and loved his wife exceedingly.

Now, by reason of this queen's coming to Winchester and taking so much upon her, it naturally befel that I lost my place a little; not only as second woman at court, but in the thoughts of the king and of the queen: and thus my approaching profession ceased to be the chief thing talked of. Alfred the king was minded to build and endow a noble monastery for ranclike virgins at Shaftesbury, and to make

¹ In this estimate of the queen of Mercia, we fancy we see a little feminine disparagement.

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me the mitred abbess thereof; but the house, which was to be of solid stone, would take long to raise; and moreover he was rather short of money; wherefore he and my father thought it good that I should become postulant at Wareham Abbey in Dorsetshire, which is dedicated to St. Etheldreda, or, as we say in the vulgar tongue, St. Audrey. The mothers and sisters amounted but to twenty; and were had in reputation, as well for the simplicity of their rule and their sanctity, as for their deft handling of the needle, and their skill in making sweetmeats. Wherefore, I was taken thither by my good father, to do the abbess to wit of my intentions. We were three days on the road, and slept one night at Winborne. The holy mother received us right kindlike; she was pleased at the honour and wealth about to be conferred on her house; add to which, as I have since learned, the arrival of a new face in a religious house is as that of an angel. We saw nought of the nuns, save in the chapel. The abbey, which stood aloof from the town and castle, on a little peninsula formed by the confluence of two rivers, was getymbrade¹ on piles of oak and alder, by reason that the marshy

¹ Built of timber; like Croyland monastery.

ground would not bear the weight of stone, and was surrounded by many willows and rushes. The chapel had, till of late, been thatched instead of leaded; and, for lack of glazing to the windows, the swallows and sparrows had been used to fly in and out, chirping and screaming, and to build their nests within the roof.

I returned with my father to Winchester, to await some needful forms. I saw a couple of treow-whirtas by the road-side, a-making of a gate, the posts whereof lay on the ground; and I noted that as much of the wood was prepared to lie under the ground as above it, for the greater strength. Then remembered I Eadwulf's homely saying; and was a little troubled that I had indeed seen but the outside of a nunnery. At the king's palace gate were gathered many men and horses; and one of our own freedmen, stepping up unto my father, said, "The lady Eadburga hath arrived." Then my heart rejoiced, for that my blessed mother, who had made the journey by short stages, had reached the royal vill. And when I saw her loved face, with the deep-lined marks of her late pains on it, that were no pains now, I felt gladlike that Heaven had restored her dear life and listened

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unto my vow, and I was ready to yield myself up, a willing ransom. Alfred the king looked grave but yet kind, when he saw me: and, faith he, "Thou hast taken the first step now, and wilt not, I think, fall back." I saw he would not think highly of me if I did.

Then, or ever my father returned unto king Buhred, which he very shortly did, we had a little snatch of family happiness, before we parted for ever: for I saw his face no more. Very bitter-sweet was our communing together; but my mother was a very conscientious woman,¹ and would on no account put a stumbling-block in my path by her lamentations. I wonder, even now, that they opposed not my vocation a little earlier, nor bemoaned it a little more than, it seems to me, they did. After all, I was very young and tender. . . .

Howbeit, Alfred the king had other burthens on his mind. It fell one day, that I was illuminating a capital G with gold, and with scarlet, and with purple, when he came and stood beside me, overlooking me. I thought that peradventure he was again making merry at my

¹ She was living in the time of Aelfred, who speaks of her in terms of high praise.

expense, and was about to ask him what fault he was now finding, when I heard him give a deep sigh; and, looking up, saw he was not thinking of my work in any wise, but of something afar off. And seeing me look up, he saith, "Woe is me, my sister! . . . I wis not if to any good I have as yet been born. The land is full of foemen:—what have I done? nothing. The land also is full of misery,—what have I done? nothing. The land also is full of ignorance, and so is its king, and what have I done? nothing. Woe is me!"—I said, "All men love you, my king." He said, "But I despise myself. For I know something should be done, and I know not how to do it, nor what it is. . . . Ho! the happy man that ever had a sword hanging over his head by a fingle hair! And yet so it always is with me!"¹ And he groaned in himself and turned away.

Another time, we were riding at a breathing pace, through the green shaw, when we heard a countryman behind the bushes say to his fellow, "Thou didst not vail thy cap unto the king." And the other made answer, "Na, I wunna. For, as comely as he is, wi's blue eyen an' white

¹ See Alfred's Boethius.

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teeth, he's as cruel as a viking, an' strings up poor knaves an' they do but say bentgrafs is fox-tail. I'fe none of such vikingr." Then the king said to me under his breath, bitterly, "So, all men love me! . . . I am a viking! sorrow is mine, my sifter! I did but seek to keep them from notorious lying and violence and taking of bribes by a few examples: and they say I hang men for mistaking one grafs for another!" Then considered I, and saw that of all men kings are born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward; and I pitied him in my heart. Also I saw that nothing mundane, including worldly pomp, royal estate, beauty of person, connubial felicity, can give entire peace; which cannot be found out of ourselves, nor yet in ourselves, but only in God. Howbeit, I did not yet apprehend this perfectly.

As about this time, Alfred the king returned the Durham Book to the monks of Lindisfarne; offering them twenty hides of land, with men and horses thereto belonging, if they would part with it. But they would not; forasmuch as they alleged its value to be above rubies: therefore they returned him his circlet and holy ring.¹

¹ rests on no better authority than that of Ethelfled, which, we

Also about this season began the doctrine of transubstantiation, newly brought over from France, to be much spoken about and spoken against among us. To me Ethelfled it seemeth the people of that land must needs, like the Athenians of old, be ever running after some new thing: inasmuch as, not many years back, they took up the religious worship of graven images, and thought to bring us unto it; albeit, we would not hearken unto them. Also, there are those among them that fable a place cleped purgatory, where the souls of them that were neither bad nor good (as though Christ spake of any but the sheep and goats!) are to be kept until that the prayers of the living set them free. I can only say that it will be a bad day for England when these corruptions are allowed to creep in and establish themselves among us: peradventure they will, for that we are too wanting in suspicion and too fond of imitating our neighbours; howbeit, I hope it will not be in the time of me Ethelfled; they shall not be countenanced in this house if I can help it.

need not repeat, is none at all. The Durham Book is one of the most interesting relics in the MSS. department of the British Museum.

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Now, the time of my admission as postulant drawing nigh, my women were busied in making me the given number of white tunics; and I divided among them as impartially as I could, my pale and dark tunics, and all the rest of the gay coloured raiment I no longer should want. For simplicity and uniformity of attire is the first rule of the religious life. Natheless, my white tunics cost double the price of the coloured, and were more trouble to make. For there were certain folds in the wide sleeves I was minded to have fitted with much nicety, for the greater grace; which cost my maidens much trouble and some tears: whereupon Urfried, my mother's woman, was heard to say there was less trouble in fitting a bride than a nun. Urfried would fain have all the credit to herself; and when the younger woman tried the fitting and missed it, she was heard to say, "Young people are wonder' wife now-a-days; and yet I have been thought to know a cricket from a grasshopper."

Now Ethelfwitha's mind was that I should enjoy as much world's-pleasure as possible in the little time me remained: whereas, I desired, and my mother upbore me in it, that I should

thenceforth partake of nothing that should interfere with my vocation.

Nevertheless, there was a pleasure, the only one in store, and a full brief one, the which my heart fastened on as greedily as it could have done on any pleasure of the world. This was my looked-for journey to St. Audrey's in company of the king and the queen, who were minded to see me to the last, and who, I thought, would afford me even pleasanter and dearer companionship than even my father had done; and I wis that the imaginings of this journey, its halts and short stages, and my naturally being foremost in my companions' thoughts, blinded me no little to the obscure darkness beyond. But mark how mundane things turn out! My mother was too feeble for the journey: Alfred the king was detained at court by pressing business; and he behoved to allot the conduct of the progress to the last person I could have wished to go with me. I ventured to name this slightly unto the king. He said, "Why?" . . . Alas! how hard a matter it sometimes is, when "Why" is asked, to give a straightforward answer! . . . I did not, and the matter stood as it was.

Now Ethelfwitha was purposed in her heart to go with me, at least one day's journey : nothing could shake her. So a company of spears was appointed ; and the Mercian queen, thinking it promised fair to be a pleasing party, and being no ways minded to keep house with my mother, spake of going and returning with Ethelfwitha. Truly this would have spoiled all ; and if she had had the least rightlike feeling, she would not have thought to thrust herself between the parting embraces of two dear sisters. Happily, she gave it up ; partly because Alfred the king went not, partly, methinketh, because that her hair always roughened with much riding in the wind, let her smear it ever so much with honey. And thus, my loved sister and I had not the trouble of her company.

I will not say much of my parting with my mother : it could not fail that we should weep fore ; howbeit, I dried mine eyes as soon as I could. Whoever you are, now a-reading this book, you cannot need to be told that great stir was occasioned at St. Audrey's by the arrival of the queen, who thought fit to go with me the whole way. All that day there was bustle and activity ; the day following commenced my

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three days' retreat, which I bore better than I had looked for ; that is, more brave-like, but I think, not much to my spiritual good, for my thoughts were all in tumult. Then I confessed, and we all went to mass (the queen had received the king's concurrence by a special messenger) ; then I, in white yclad, stood outside the chapel door, and knocked. The priest and holy mother asked what I wanted. I made answer that I desired to be admitted as postulant into the community. They let me in, and led me up unto the altar. Then the priest cut off a small lock of my hair, and blessed me, and gave me a rosary. I arose, and went away, quite self-collected. At noon, Ethelfwitha departed.

In going up unto the altar, I had heard some one whisper unto my sister, "What a beautiful postulant!" which I tried not to attend to, nor remember. But how weak and wrong a thing to let me hear such an ejaculation at such a moment! For, doth not a single dead fly taint the box of precious ointment? And my self-devotion was at that moment as ointment poured forth at my Saviour's feet. Thus we add to one another's sins and to one another's burthens.

When Ethelfwitha had departed, the holy

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mother summoned me into her chamber, and told me in detail the rule of the house.¹ While she was yet speaking, some one tapped at the door; and she said, "Come in," and proceeded with her discourse. A nun entered, who straightway kneeled down within the chamber, and continued in that posture until the holy mother had brought her speech to a close, which she did not hasten, but rather drew out. Now, I Ethelfled had continually seen persons kneel unto the king and to the queen, and unto mine own father and mother, but had never known them thus left long together without being bidden to arise; and the newness of the sight was accompanied by commiseration for the nun, who appeared feeble in body, and frequently changed colour. Howbeit, the holy mother at length said composedly, "Thou mayst arise, daughter;" whereupon, the nun gat from off her knees, approached the holy mother, kneeled again, kissed the hem of her garment, and then delivered some trifling message. This little occurrence went much to the heart of me Ethelfled: I wist somewhat of the authority and dignity of the *matres monasterii*

¹ It is a disputed point whether the Anglo-Saxon monasteries were not under a simpler and more primitive rule than the Benedictine.

without doors, as, how that a mitred abbess was exempt from the jurisdiction of the diocesan, having in herself episcopal authority within her precincts, and also taking her seat in the great council of the nation; but I had neither beheld nor conceived the extent of her rule over her house, nor the amount of subjection of body, will, and thought, exacted of every soul within it. For albeit I had been bred up by an aunt who was an abbess, or, as we say in Saxon, *abudisse*, yet the children in a monastic school see nought of the nuns' interior lives, wherefore my introduction to it was new and somewhat revolting to me.

The holy mother had scarce concluded her speaking, when the bell rang us to the chapel, where I was ware of twenty pair of round eyes furtively gazing at me. After prayers came supper; and I found that my admission was to be kept as a kind of festival: though there was but a humble feast, after all. The sisters had treen¹ platters; and only the holy mother and I had silver spoons. Indeed, mortification was their rule; but they seemed willing to depart therefrom, too, all they could. As saith Tinne, "He helped him to the

¹ Wooden trenchers.

best, though it were but a marrow-bone." My seat was next the holy mother, which I took for a pleasing recognition of my rank ; howbeit, I shortly learned it was only because I happened to be the only postulant. Recreation being permitted, there ensued some attempt at general discourse ; but it proved so dull that I was glad when the bell tolled for complines. Then we all formed in solemn procession ; and, with slow step and heads abased, proceeded to night-prayer. A novice read the prayers and we made response ; while candles were lighted before different shrines. Then we remained awhile in silent meditation, very hushed and still : then one of the sisters read a discourse : then the holy mother blessed us : the portrets brought in the house-keys and laid them on the altar, saying, " O holy Father ! preserve us this night from all evil !" Then we each kissed the floor ; and proceeded orderly, silently, and in the dark, each to our own cell. There, having knelt in prayer, each again kissed the ground, saying, " Dust I am, and to dust shall I return : " then crossed herself and lay down, saying, " Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, to you I commend my spirit."

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I Ethelfled could neither sleep nor weep, nor even think. A tight cord seemed tied across my heart: spiritually speaking, *there was one*. Wherefore I lay awake and still: and, at dead of night, I heard stealthful footsteps along the gallery. Two nuns and two novices were on their way to the chapel, to spend the consecrated hour.

At four in the morning we arose. We went in procession to the chapel. We spent an half-hour on our knees, in silent meditation. The bell rang for matins.

After this, we brake our fast. Milk, bread, and a white, ill-made cheese, were placed on a table without a cloth. Each had a treen cup and platter. Each maintained silence. One read aloud. After breakfast, I was about to go and wash my hands, but was rebuked, and told I must first ask leave of a professed nun. Thereat I Ethelfled was moved in spirit: howbeit I gave no token thereof. Many a stone lies under the smooth water.

Then we went to our appointed duties; some to their needles, some to their books, some to their psalmody, some to ministering unto the poor. My business lay in the scriptorium. It

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was the pleasure of Alfred the king that I should obtain a competent knowledge of Latin ; it being, indeed, very much against his rihtwise will that the church prayers should not be in the vulgar tongue ; since he would have had all men pray not only with the lips, but with the understanding also. Therefore it was that I Ethelfled, with his and the holy mother's concurrence, applied myself diligently unto the study thereof. And albeit I lamentably missed the aid of the king's chaplains, whose place my new teachers very poorly supplied, yet, by uncommon application on mine own part, I progressed fast if not well : inasmuch as, though I never attained unto writing Latin with purity, yet my readines in it exceeds that of any woman I know, to say nothing of many a priest, of that sort whom the king is wont to call abbey-lubbers.

Now in this respect I soon found, and have continued to find all my life, that the labour brings its own reward. As saith the wise king, " If thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding ; yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding ; if thou seekest her as

silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures ; then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God." And this heartiness of application brought it to pass that the hours I spent in the scriptorium soon became the happiest of my day : and I even learned to love the death-like stillness, only broken by the twittering of the sparrows outside the window,¹ and the security from any more importunate interruption. Howbeit, just in the middle, it might be, of a difficult sentence, the prayer-bell would ring ; and after prayers came dinner ; and after dinner, the hour of recreation, when it was singular to note after what various and child-like fashions the sisters would relax themselves . . . all under the holy mother's eye ; and in her hearing, too !—and if she heard a word she thought amiss, (and they were many,) the recreation was suspended ; which, save for the punishment of the rest, I should never have been sorry for, for it was no recreation to me. At the hour's end, the bell tolled twice ; then each nun crossed herself, kneeled down, repeated Pater Noster and Ave Maria, and returned to her allotted duty ; and then my real recreation began. For,

¹ Ethyrl ; literally, eye-hole.

if I returned not unto the scriptorium, I applied myself, still at the will of the king and of the holy mother, to the study of church music; which, as understood and practised in this abbey, was, I must say for it, exceeding bad. In king Alfred's royal chapel I had been used, aforetime, to have my soul lifted as unto heaven, while listening, as Aldhelm saith, "to the great organ with a thousand blasts, the ear being soothed by the windy bellows, while the rest shone in the gilt chests." Also the sweet fingers had transported me much with their holy hymning after the fashion of John the priest, who first brought the Roman method of singing into our island; and I learned many of their sacred chants by ear, and could finger them on the organ; and oftentimes I regretted that there was no better method of marking the time appportioned to the square characters that signified the notes than that derived from the quantity of syllables inscribed over them. For some syllables should be uttered shortly, and some long drawn out, even as long as the breath will last without making the finger red in the visage or constraining to an abrupt conclusion: and, to facilitate this, I e'en invented a way for mine own use,

which Alfred the king laughed at, and yet said had good in it : to wit, setting the words beneath instead of above the notes, and placing above each note a numeral to signify how long the finger should hold his breath, whether while one might deliberately count one, two, three, or four. And this invention I was fully persuaded in mine own mind would greatly improve the practice of psalmody ; and whensoever I should be abbatisa, I resolved to impart it to my nuns ; but meanwhile it was necessary that I should study it a little more myself ; wherefore I took every occasion afforded me by the holy mother, which was chiefly of an afternoon, to pursue the study of music all I could. And it commonly fell, that just as I was beginning to lose remembrance of things terrene and restraints conventual, and was upsoaring to heaven's gate like a lark, the last bell would ring. Then the rest of the round went on : in describing one day I describe a hundred.

Now the second night of my postulant's life, though I could not sleep, I could weep. Methought I saw Ethelfwitha with her little child in her arms upstretching its tiny hands and pulling her hair over her face ; and my pale mother,

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grave-like, sitting by and looking on as if she noted them not, but were thinking of me. Then I wept and wept, and thought of Ethelfwitha's last whisper, "Remember thou hast taken no vows as yet, thou hast only desired to enter the community;" and I was sore bested. Then, while as I lay weeping, I minded me of Eadwulf's bringing the news of my mother's illness, and of my going into the king's chapel before matins and vowing a vow to dedicate myself a *willing* servant unto the Lord, if so be my mother's life might be spared. And as soon as I bethought me of this, my soul was no more soft, but I yielded to a quiet peace, and crossed my hands on my breast, and presently fell on sleep.

Next day I was summoned into the presence of the holy mother. She bade me give up any little trinkets and keepsakes I might have about me that might still keep up some remembrance of the world without. Reluctantly, I gave up one or two little love-tokens I had hoped, from their simplicity, I might retain; but there was one, I affirm and declare by whatever is solemn, that I remembered not at the time, nor, indeed, had on my person: to wit, that lock of king

Alfred's hair which was cut off the first time of all that ever he came unto our house; and which I had since cnytted with one of Ethelswitha's, and now was using as a book-mark. I declare I remembered it not: *afterwards*, I thought it was too late, the time was gone by, it would seem so silly and shameful to produce it; the holy mother would think I had kept it back of purpose, which I had not,—I had clean forgotten. Besides, that word 'whatever thou hast about thee' . . . and I had it not about me. So there could be no sin. Howbeit, methought I would confess it to the priest next time, and do as he bade me. Yet, as it fell, I in very deed forgot it that time; only to remember it again afterwards; so that it became a burthen unto me. Then I hid away the book-mark; but I wist where it was; had I had access to fire or candle, I would have consumed it. And so I fretted and was sorry for my sin; and at last told of it with tears, and said truly, I had forgotten it at first, and should I keep it now or give it up? To my great surprise and relief, the priest (he was very old and indulgent, though not very clever,) seemed to take little heed about it, and said I might keep it. Oh the

joy of that permission ! It was not that I cared so much, in very deed, about the book-mark, (albe it was the last token of those I loved,) as that it had been the occasion of sin unto me ; and I thought that the holy mother had been the first cause of that sin, by exacting something of me that God would not have required.

Bearing this occurrence in mind, I have ever been very lenient with the young persons committed to my keeping ; quick to detect deceit even about trifles, but gentle with them, and not exacting. For why should we increase each other's burthens ? Are they not already heavy enough ?

There were a few curiously illuminated missals and manuscripts in our library, to which I was allowed access ; and a sister named Paula was proficient in this art, and gave me much instruction ; so that I became skilful in the execution of delicate borderings and ornamental letters. When I had prosecuted this art some months, I happened to obtain a view of the Psalter I had illuminated for king Alfred, which he had lent unto the holy mother ; and, alone as I was in the scriptorium, my cheeks were warmly suffused, when I beheld what miserable performances I in

my folly and ignorance had set before the king. "What could he and must he have thought of them? and how was it he laughed no more?" were questions that troubled me greatly. At last, methought I was grieving more heartily for having been guilty of a laughable folly, than I might peradventure do for a serious sin. Whereat I took heart, and resolved to be a good artist even yet. He that stumbleth and falleth not, bettereth his pace.

Albeit the first week of my new course seemed as though it never would end, my neck grew used to the collar at last; and the zeal with which I applied myself unto my studies took off for the season all sense of wearifulness and mood-seornesse. Howbeit, my sedentary life and overmuch labour of the brain presently disordered my health. Thereat the holy mother took grief; for, if I died before my profession, what would become of the goodly hereditaments that were to be abalienated to the monastery? Moreover, she was well affected towards me: none the less so for my being the queen's sister, though she lost no occasion of showing that worldly distinctions were made no account of within abbey precincts. Nevertheless, seeing me fall sick,

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albeit I needed not to be sent into the infirmary, she somewhat abated the rigidity of the rule in my case, and caused me to exchange the too diligent employment of my pen for a certain measure of exercise in her garden. Even this was little enough for one that had been used aforetime to so much exercise in the open air; and whileas I paced the narrow walks amid the flower-beds, I mused in my mind whether women served God more rightlike for being mewed up like birds in cages; and whether, when I came to be abbess, I might not, in this respect, any wise remit the rule.

Now, while I was at my pen, the sisters were mostly at their needles; their embroidery was a very miracle for delicateness; and as it was much in request in the world without, and brought no small gain unto the abbey, they were habituated to work garments of empty pride in diversified colours, which I Ethelfled secretly thought inconsistent with their profession. For had they not by their own examples borne testimony against the wimples and the tunics of this world, the cyrtels, the mentels, and the fine linen? and had they not adopted, instead of a stomacher a sackcloth, and instead of well-set hair baldness,

and I was nigh to saying, instead of much washing and bathing, a great indifference to the application of fresh water? Sorry am I to say it, but so it was: never have I yet been able to understand why, to present the cleaner heart unto God, we should go with unwashen hands; never could I see the peculiar sanctitude of St. Cuthbert's practice of wearing his leathern boots day and night for months together till they dropped off his feet; nor was there anything I less admired in Queen Etheldreda, abbess of Ely, and our patron saint, than her wearing none but woollen under-garments, and rarely using a hot bath. Howbeit, these things must of course be approached with reverence; and there may be something very improving in dirt, though I Ethelfled have never been able to find it, but on the contrary have always endeavoured to inculcate among the poor that resorted unto me for an alms, that cleanliness was next to godliness.

To a certain extent, it was indispensable to the sisters who brodered fine linen, or they would have marred their work. A new pattern was to them a thing of infinite moment. Discovering this, I recreated myself by inventing¹

¹ In later times, we find Dunstan designing patterns for a lady's dress.

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and tracing for them figures of faints, angels, men and women hunting and hawking, greyhounds, eagles, peacocks, &c., the which they with their minute stitches ywrought in the perfectest manner. I think the Babylonish garment that made Achan to sin could scarce have been rarer than some of the robes which they worked; but they were too stupid to be able to depart from what was set down for them in any wise, without involving themselves in difficulty. Alas for the poor sisters! they were more like grown children than I had wist that women might be. The second evening that I abode among them, I had a moving instance of the slavish degradations to which they were subject. During supper-time, a sister was constrained to prostrate herself on the floor, and trace thereon the form of the cross with her tongue, for having betrayed some signals of impatience when one of the mothers chode her for having disfigured her work by pricking her finger. And while I was sorry at heart, and could not forbear casting wistful glances at the holy mother, who immovable fate, the others only smiled among themselves, and had no touch of compassion for her, the poor sister.

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When I thus noted, day by day, how foolish and unspiritual were these my allotted companions, to cast my lot amongst whom I had absconded myself from the angelical discourings of holy Neot, the deep reasonings of our Mercian Werewulf, and the heavenward aspirations of Alfred the king, I was dismayed within myself at the thought of becoming like these my associates, who only served to deaden my devotion. My walk with God became spiritless and languid: I confessed it with tears unto the priest: he prescribed the usual penances and remedies; and, after all, concluded with bidding me look forward to my new abbey. The first stone had, indeed, not yet been laid; but an assured hope, however distant, gives the soul a stay; and in my mind I saw it already getymbrade and gefrætwan,¹ leaved and glazed, with loud bells and deep-sounding organ, and beheld myself the mitred abbes, taking precedence of the abbes of Wimborne in the great council, and ruling a community of holy and high-born sisters, all spiritual, all intellectual, all meek-

¹ Adorned with teeth-like ornaments or zigzags. The word getymbrade, though strictly applicable only to wooden buildings, was in common use to express stonemasonry.

spirited, and all profoundly attached unto myself. Then considered I and bethought me how we would relieve the poor, nurse the sick, instruct the ignorant, entertain noble travellers, illuminate manuscripts, send alms to foreign parts, and be well reported of all Christendom. Then mused I in my mind that at the present time my practice in fundry of these acts of mercy was but small; I wist not the properties of herbs like Gunfried, nor to dress wounds like Urfried, nor to use the vein-knife like my blessed mother, nor to infuse cooling drinks like Ethelfwitha. Wherefore I made prayer unto the holy mother that I might take my turn in the infirmary, which she readily granted. Herein I found two or three trifling cases, and one that was like to be protracted of long time, to the great trial of patient and nurse . . . to wit, an afflicted sister called Mildred, who I think was as great a sufferer as the nun Tortgith of Barking, that was bound in the bonds of excruciating disease nine years, till at length her bones would hardly hold together. Is it not in Bede?

The skin of this poor nun was as colourless as parchment, and her frame so attenuated as that I could lift her with ease; and such were her

patience and sweetness that I clave unto her in love, and found no greater pleasure than in ministering unto her night and day. And whereas her former nurfes were wellnigh wearied out, and had grown somewhat fretful at being incessantly hindered of their sleep, they were thankful to be quit of their charge. And she, exchanging help that was begrudged for help that was proffered in love, conceived for me a deep and grateful affection, and seemed to take a new lease of life ; albe it proved to be but a blaze of the expiring taper in the socket. Now, of this poor nun, I wist no more than that she was a thegn's daughter ; for it was our rule to hold no discourse with each other concerning our forepast lives ; wherefore she in like manner knew no more of me than that I was sister to the queen. However, she made out, as was no hard matter, that I was sorry of cheer, and took to the cloister unkindlike. Wherefore, at those seasons her pains intermitted and gave her a little rest, she spake angel-like of the cares and temptations of this sorry world, and its short duration ; and the long duration of the glory-bright heaven, and how little it would matter when once we had attained unto it, and saw our

Lord in the face, through what tribulations we had passed to reach it, except, indeed, that every tear shed would be another pearl in our crown. And she told me that when she found herself pining for a sight of the green fields, she thought how gay and enamelled would be the fields of glory ; and when for the blue sky, she thought how blue would be the sky of heaven ; and when for dear faces and old friends, how she should there have them for ever and ever, besides many new ones, as well or better worth knowing. Hearing her thus discourse, I became insensible or indifferent to my late afflictions ; and she just lived to see me take the white veil, and then departed in peace, without need of the rosary expressly blessed by the Pope to procure her a happy death, for which the holy mother had sent to Rome. I looked out of window as her happy spirit fled, to see was there a trail of glory, but there was nothing of the sort, nor yet any audible sound of celestial singing ; and yet I believe she went straight to heaven, for all that.

Now, as touching the white veil, which, had it not been for Mildred, I might never have taken at all, in spite of the contumely, so disap-

pointed was I of what I had looked for in a convent life. . . . The holy mother sent for me one day, while Mildred was still in the body and hard wrestling with her last enemy, and my mind was so pre-occupied with her, and mine eyes so accustomed to the darkened room, that the light of the gallery seemed strange to me. . . . The holy mother did me to wit that the king and the queen had heard of my tender ministrations to the afflicted sister, and were marvellously moved thereat: that they esteemed and revered me beyond what they had ever done before I entered the cloister, and were purposed to show their uncommon sense of my deservings by coming to see me take the white veil: that I was a light set upon an hill, that could not be hid; and othermuch to the same purport, which with earthly pride and human vanity elated the mind that, on entering the holy mother's chamber, had been set on far better things. The end was, that at that moment I felt no averseness to engage for all that was expected of me; and the preparations which thereupon immediately ensued for the approaching festivity, filled the whole abbey with jocundity, and made me see smiling faces wherever I went. Every one now was so

kindly affectioned towards me that it seemed as if hitherto a cloud had been between me and them, which had prevented me from discerning their merit: whereas, I believe, a transitory gleam of sunshine a-lighting of a dull landscape, would have been the better image. Even the nun Mildred, reviving a little ere she sped away into the realms of light, took an innocent pleasure in the richness of my dress, and the tiring of my hair, which she would smooth down with her thin hand: and, to please her, I would smile in her face whenever our eyes met; so that I seemed, even to myself, to be more light of heart. But then came my nine days' retreat, in silence, solitude, and fasting, which brought my soul more acquainted with itself than ever it had been yet. I think, if it had been protracted ever so little more, I should have gone mad, the pressure was so heavy. As it was, I had dreams and visions, sleeping and waking, of good and bad angels and many unutterable things, so that sometimes I could scarce forbear shrieking aloud. At length came a dull, apathetic fit of waiting, and counting the days and the hours that divided me from Ethelfwitha; and then a heavy, dreamless sleep. Therefrom I was awakened by the

holy mother in her blindest voice ; she told me the king and queen had arrived, and the bishop was ready to confess me, and then I should dress, and sup in the parlour.

Oh, it was no simulated joy with which I greeted my sister ! Saith the king, “ So, Ethelfleda, you hold on to the end ! ” and I knew from his look and tone that he trusted I should do so in very deed, and would have been fore amazed and troubled had I given any signal of wavering. From that moment I took my part, and played it. Oh, how gay was our supper ! how sleepless the night that followed it ! Awake I had been dreaming, and, when I might as well have dreamed, I could not sleep. The holy mother, on supervising my attire before I entered the royal presence, had said, “ Thou wilt sadden the queen’s heart, dear daughter, if she seeth how pale thy cheeks have waxen with nursing thy poor sister ; ” and would have touched them with a little stibium, a thing I looked not for in a nunnery ; howbeit, though I dared not gainsay her with my lips, mine eyes did so in silence so plainly that she, smiling, said, “ Thou art red enow, now . . . we will let nature hold her own ” —and stayed her hand.

That night, methinks the king told me more of the current affairs of the realm during the foregone year than the holy mother would have recommended my hearing ; but who shall say unto a king, What doest thou ? Wherefore I had matters to stay my mind upon for many a day : and persuaded I am that the cognizance of moving transactions takes our thoughts from too intent self-scrutiny, and too harassing afflictions about petty troubles. The sisters being all so jocund without any simulation, Ethelswitha was avised to say, " How happy you all seem here ! Were I not a queen, I would fain be a nun." And the king, eating our placentas,¹ which, indeed, were very delicate, said, " If you holy ladies are always eating these good things, no marvel you are so fat and well-liking." . . . If, indeed ! —I have often since thought of their sayings.

There were certain law-deeds and parchments, abalienating certain of the portion of lands allotted to me, unto the abbey ; but the most part was kept back till I should take the black veil. After the king and the queen had retired unto the guest-chamber, I remained kneeling before the host until the first nocturn. At day-

¹ Cheefe-cakes.

break I received the holy communion. Then I was dressed as a bride, and the queen herself adorned me with jewels and sleeked my hair with the silver comb she had used in my childhood. When she saw mine eyelids quiver, she kissed me, and said, "Thou art quite worn out, dear child, by thy tending of that poor nun." Then my bridemaids led me to the steps of the altar. Then we sang "Domine, non sum dignus." Then the bishop blessed my novice's dress, and cut off a large tress of my hair. Then I retired into the house, carrying my consecrated habit, and I was clad in it, and my hair cut short round. Then I returned, carrying my late garments, which, after answering the appointed questions, I trampled on before the altar. Then the bishop blessed me, and gave me a crucifix and a rosary.

The rest of the day was given to recreation. Mine was taking Ethelfwitha to the bedside of the poor Mildred, who looked on her with great reverence and affection, and spake certain words which the queen said in after-time she never forgot. When the king, the queen, the bishop, and all the gay train had departed, I in my new habit returned to the infirmary, where

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the poor Mildred now lay in one of her paroxysms. Feeling my hot tears drop on her face, she openeth her eyes, and gazing on me with an intense-like love and gratitude, faith, "Sweet angel!" But I for myself was a-weeping.

But this was my best place. I held unto her till she died; and thereon returned to the scriptorium, and completed for king Alfred a copy of the Gospel of St. John, the reading whereof for the first time was to my soul's immortal good. Howbeit, I marvelled to find therein no word of abbeyes nor monasteries, nor of the celibate life, and spake thereof unto the confessor: but he said St. John's was a supplementary gospel, very good and profitable as far as it went; but wanting in many particulars I should find in the other gospels. So I took his word for it, having no help for it, and learned of St. John all I could till I had attained unto the perusal of the other gospels, which occurred not until I had taken the black veil; and then, though I found therein no warrant for the celibate state, I had no help for it, and was forced to hope that, though they sanctioned it not, they would not have forbidden it.

Now this my manuscript, being of a far dif-

ferent execution from the Pſalter formerly mentioned, gave the king great contentation, and he cauſed it to be enſoſed in a golden caſe, with precious ſtones beſet, which, he ſaid, was, after all, but a poor huſk for ſo rich a kernel. The firſt page was in gold capitals on a pale lilac ground; the ſecond in gold capitals on a dark blue ground.¹ This labour occupied nearly the entirety of my year's novitiate, and, there being then no queſtion whether or no I ſhould profeſs, I took the vows with all the privacy and ſolemnity thereto belonging. My nine days' retreat found me in a quieter and more ſolemnized ſtate of mind than when I was wavering between one courſe and another. I confeſſed, as before death, unto the biſhop, and received pontifical abſolution. The day was uſhered in by the tolling of the great bell muffled, as if I were in very deed dead; then enſued high maſs, the celebrants and altar all in black. While the requiem was a-ſinging, the mothers and ſiſters drew nigh the ſanctuary, each bearing a lighted taper. I proſtrated myſelf on a black cloth, mine arms extended as if on a croſs, during the

¹ Vide Cott. MSS. Tit. A. 2: a copy of the Goſpels that belonged to Athelſtan.

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litany for the dead. Then the bishop removed my white veil, and I retired into the sacristy, where my head was shaven. Then my head was covered, and I returned unto the bishop, who blessed my black veil and my coif. The holy mother produced the parchment inscribed with my vows, which I repeated in a low voice only to be heard by the bishop and herself, he holding the host before me, to represent the very person of Christ, to whom I was now giving myself for ever. Then I signed the parchment on my knees; and the holy mother signed it; and then the bishop covered me with the black veil, and gave me the host; and I kissed the holy mother's feet, and we sang "Domine, non sum dignus." Thenceforth I was called mother.

This was another step, and a very awful one in my life. I was not yet nineteen years of age, but I seemed to have left the world many years. Sometimes that appeared a dream, sometimes this; but I clave to Christ all I could, only that what were meant for my helps sometimes proved my hindrances. And now and then the question arose, Do we love Christ the more for seeing the world *through a black veil*? However, while we continue in the body, the veil must in

many things remain on our hearts. Questionless, the world will look small enough, anywise, when we come to leave it.

My experiences, searching as they were, were presently exchanged for those of another sort, by the unexpected demise of the holy mother. She was of middle age, hale and hearty; but, one fast day, she ate too freely of a raw sallet, which she wist full well her stomach could not bear. Well-a-day! we all have our temptations, and we know we are not to abide here for ever; and she had the use of the blessed crucifix that came from Rome, too late for Mildred; nevertheless, it saved her not from strong spasms and convulsions. Wherefore I, setting no great store by the same when it came into my possession, made a present of it to one who thought more of it, and who, on any wise, is the happier for it while she liveth, whatever ease it may give her at her death.

In some measure unto my surprise, I found myself unanimously elected abbatisa in the late holy mother's place. There was, indeed, none other nun among the sisterhood so well born, so well endowed with goods, nor so generally beloved; and I had always supposed I should

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eventually be abbesses of Shaftesbury ; but there were so many elder women than I, who had been a long time in the convent, that I was taken at unawares, and much startled at my new position. Though desiring free action and authority, I found myself unprepared, and gave myself much unto prayer. Five abbesses were present at my consecration, which was very imposing ; and in private they favoured me with the results of their own experiences on many matters, some of which I found profitable, others not. The nuns offered me their homage with a heartiness that was genuine enough, for they concluded, from my youth and inexperience, they should enjoy some abatements to their rule. Howbeit, I passed the entirety of sundry days and nights in retreat, fasting, praying, and reflecting ; and having at length made out my future course, I proceeded to work it out, in the manner I shall record in my next book, which I am stedfastly purposed shall be my last, and wherein I shall have something moving to relate, touching our salvation from great danger by Alfred the king.



BOOK VI.

WHEN I, Ethelfled, consider in my mind how short a thing is life, it seemeth we need not to be in so great a hurry as we often are to get over the intermediate points between one desired period of it and another. Here had I been impatient enough, I trow, to find myself abbess of Shaftesbury; and now that I was elected abbess of Wareham I found myself taken by surprise. Therefore it was that for several days I shut myself up in strict retreat, bearing in mind that great responsibilities require great preparations, even though habitual preparedness be not a-wanting. There must be solemn intercourse with ourselves and our Maker, with which our nearest, dearest friends intermeddle not. In this my retreat, strange unaccustomed feelings arose, such as I had not known when I took the white and black veils: and I found

my thoughts and desires taking quite a new bent, and the movements of my will tending quite another way; until, I suppose, my whole internal being underwent some change, the character and amount of which I was not fully sensible of at the time; nor, I think, have ever been, till now that I come to look back.

From this season I had no more dreams and visions and contentions with enemies unspeakable: I found I was awake, and felt I must be doing.

It was dinner time, and on a fast day, when I left my retreat and took the abbess's place at table. Every eye was fixed on me. It fell that day that our fish was not dressed with the usual care: howbeit, I made no comment, but ate thereof sparingly and without egg sauce, to which the others helped themselves plentifully. The novice, whose turn it was to read, delivered to us the life of Egbert the priest, who lived upon bread and milk; and I was musing thereon after she had come to an end, without witting that all had finished, when suddenly becoming aware that from me was expected a benediction, I with some fervour ejaculated the ceorl's grace, "Thanks be to God for my good dinner." And

immediately noting thereupon a general smile, if not on the lips yet in the eyes of all present, I looked at them stedfastly, and with great deliberateness and determination repeated, "Children, let us thank God for our good dinner!" and then pronounced the Latin benediction. Every eye sank before mine.

Then I went to the late abbess's cell, which I intended thenceforth to make mine own; and I directed that the feather-stuffed bed, with hryfte, beadreafes, hoppscytan, and all that thereto belonged, should be carried into the infirmary for the use of the sick; contenting myself with mine old hard pallet, without either pallia or cortinas. Then I went into the holy mother's parlour, where there were many papers to be read and destroyed; and therein I found some things that liked me, and some that liked me not. While thus busied, with a fire of billets burning on the hearth, some one tapped at the door, and, at my bidding, came in and kneeled humbly on the ground. I said, "Rise, daughter;" and she got off her knees, and with many self-abasings drew nigh unto me and kissed the hem of my garment. I concluded some great matter was in hand; but it was to

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tell me of an intolerable odour in her cell, which had long, she thought, endangered her health. I told her she might exchange it for the cell I had just left ; and so continued my affairs.

Next day this sister, whose name was Hæburge,¹ presented herself anew, and with still multiplying genuflexions, represented that in her new cell there was a draught, saving my holy presence, that was enough to blow her head off. I regarded her keenly ; but, remembering to have heard her once complain of the tooth-ache, I told her that she might remove my bed into my old cell, and have the abbess's cell herself.

The nuns now thought they had only to ask and have ; and sister Selethryth² next presented herself to inform me that she was quite losing her hand for pastry, and opined that we had better eat placentas daily than that she should lose her cunning. Also, to suggest that broths or soups should be served on Wednesdays and Fridays in addition to eggs, lentils, cheese, and buttermilk ; and that we should have gaudy

¹ The Anglo-Saxon nuns do not seem to have adopted new names on their profession. We read in Bede of Tortgith, Edith, Coenberg, &c.

² Good-threatener : a Saxon female name.

days on other festivals besides Easter and Whitsuntide. Unto this I Ethelfled would not incline mine ear, no, not for a moment; and thereafter I began to manifest unto them that gentleness was no proof of weakness. To their obedience I kept them up; and I also set myself, like Nehemiah, son of Hachaliah, to rectify certain abuses. It had been well for me Ethelfled, had I only applied myself to essential reforms: howbeit, I was but young yet. I have beforetime said that the barbarous singing of the sisters had all along been very grievous unto me; being very little removed from the squealing of cats. I now took them seriously to task on this matter, and told them how detrimental it was to devotion: but my lecture was only received with sulky looks. Nevertheless, I was purposed to carry this matter through; and, being myself gifted with an harmonious voice and a competent knowledge of music, I made use of the first holiday to call the sisters together and give them a little instruction. Herein I Ethelfled was fore let, as well by their obstinacy as stupidity. Sister Selethryth, in especial, upon my insisting on her bringing forth a note which I wist was within her compass, would sing flatter and flatter,

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and, at the last, let fly her voice with such desperation that it cracked, and produced such a miserable squeak, that sister Wynfreda, in despite of herself, burst forth into laughing. When was such indecorum heard of? All the rest, seeing my heightened colour, were sore ydrad, witting there was no other portion for sister Wynfreda than dry crusts and a dark cell : but it was against sister Selethryth, not sister Wynfreda, that my wrath was enkindled ; and upon my rebuking her very warmly for her misdeeds, she waxed so rebellious and violent, that for the sake of common order and discipline, I was constrained to put her in bonds. By force she was removed into a dark cell, she struggling all the way thither most outrageously, and smiting sister Wynfreda on the eye. Bread and water was her diet, (it was cheefecake day too !) our supper was eaten sadly, and I Ethelfled shut myself within my chamber to muse in bitterness of spirit on broken rule and despised authority. I was all weakness and ignorance, but I wist where was all wisdom and strength ; and was seeking thereunto, when, lo ! I heard a horn wind outside the gate. Alfred the king had come down to consider the defences of the castle, and had ridden

over to see how I fared, and give me greeting. Never was freondlic word more pleasant! I received him with tears in mine eyes: he marvelled thereat, and would wit why they were a-shedding. Thereupon we had a long colloquy, which was of the greatest moment to me in the conduct of mine after life. He thought me much less to be blamed than I thought myself; indeed, brake forth into laughing when he heard the origin of the offence; howbeit, he admitted the consequences were grievous, and must be remedied. To clear myself, albe he said I needed no clearing, I summoned sifter Wynfreda, the novice, to do him to wit of all had happened. Her fears had blanched her chubby cheeks and yclosed her mouth as tight as a button; by reason of which, when she had departed, the king said, "*Can* that-girl ever laugh? I could hardly take her own word for it."

Thereafter the culprit herself was brought into his presence, trembling like an aspen leaf; so as that her guards were little wanted. The king looked as grave as though he were in the witenagemot. Quoth he, "I had no knowledge until just now how hard a woman could hit . . . thou must have mistaken thy vocation, and

shouldst rather have helped me fight the Danes. Wonderlike it is to me Alfred, that any born a woman should within her heart find it to give reason of disquiet to one so young, so gentle, and so worthy of all honour as this holy mother. I Alfred, cyning, have known her ever since she was a child, and know no one, a woman born, so worthy to be loved, save her own sister, my wife. Believe me, ye are favoured among women to have such a mother for your abudisse, whose singular genius and acquired learning (nay, I Ethelfled must not trust myself to recal all this . . . ,) and who is not only holy, but high-born, not only learned, but ranlike, who refused wonderlike good offers of marriage that she might wholly give herself to heaven, and whose fame for sanctity and book-lore is beginning to be noised abroad in foreign parts. To conclude, I Alfred, king, am fully persuaded in my own mind that if ye will but give yourselves wholly and with one heart unto the direction of your holy mother, there is little question of your sisterhood becoming the most famous, not alone in England, but in Christendom, to say nothing of the more eminent among you being canonized hereafter. And to further and promote

this most desired end, it needeth nought but that ye should observe implicit obedience, unlimited good humour, holy temperance, continual quietness, steady industry, sincere piety, and take diligent heed unto your copybooks.¹ You, prisoner at the door, commonly known as Selethryth, or the good-threatener, I have desired your holy mother, who is long suffering and soon pacified, to overlook this once your unpardonable offence, on condition of sincere penitence and a week's entire silence. And now let us to prayers."

The king went with us to vespers, and sang loudly and cheerily: I did my best to imitate his example; the poor sisters sang like mice in a cheese, but more tuneably than aforetime; and the service was very refreshing and composing to us all. Then the king ordered his horse to be brought, saying, "I shall not now insist on the board and lodging for three days, you owe me for that parcel of land."² And he vouchsafed to taste our placentas; and as he departed, said, so that I only could hear, "Farewell, Ethelfleda: I shall now return to Winchester, and

¹ i.e. Waxed tablets.

² A common condition under the Saxon kings, when the abbeyes were the only places of reception for travellers.

tell Ethelfwitha I left your face two inches shorter than I found it. My good little abbess! you have been early set in authority over an intractable community; but be brave, be constant, be prayerful, and all will be well."

Thereon the king departed, leaving a freshness and gladness behind him like as we find in the green woods and fresh air and sunshine. Methought it much kindness for him to speak so well of me in hearing of my nuns; and from this time there was nothing among them but cheerfulness and obedience. Shortly there arrived from the king a present of waxed tablets and poyntels,¹ for the use of the sisters who would apply themselves to write; but I grieve to say, that after much trouble, there was not one among them that attained unto the pen of a ready writer. This is, no question, a gift from above: it comes not to all: therefore I was fain to let them apply themselves unto that for which they truly seemed to have capacity, to wit, their needles, rather than to labour painfully at that for which they had no true vocation.

As about this time, departed holy Neot, and went to glory. Verily he was a rihtwife and

¹ Iron pens.

faintly man, if ever there was one. He was born to kingly rule, and might have worn a crown; howbeit, he would not, lest the world should be too great a snare unto him. Yet, and if all our good men were to shut themselves up, what manner of rulers should we have? Howbeit, Neot ruled the ruler, ever and anon, even after his death, as will be related hereafter. He took the cowl at Glastonbury; seven times visited Rome, and, in conclusion, getymbrade a monastery. One feature of his was notable: he would try to single out the best qualities of his brethren, and unite them all in himself: as, the holiness of one, the patience of another; howbeit, he might have found them all in our Lord.

But now come I to our great and dreadful peril. The Danes, under Guthrum, who had abode in Cambridge by the space of twelve months, now prepared themselves for action, as the manner of their nation is, by lashing up their passions with dreadful howlings, clashing their swords, clanging their shields, and prancing hither and thither like so many mad creatures. It might very well have been foreboded that this would take place, so soon as the fighting season commenced: howbeit, we English, according to

our wont, had despised the danger while it was a little way off, and fate by our hearths, roasting apples and drinking hot ale all the winter. And if any one ventured to remark, "The Danes are coming!" the only answer he had for his pains was, "Oh, they are, are they?—Only let them, I say!" And so we went on in this ungodly state of security, (for why should God help those who were so little troubled to help themselves?) And the king, now and then, thought he should do something, but wist not how he should do it: and so it came to pass, the Danes entered into their ships and set sail for Wareham!

I remember it was St. Matthias's Eve . . . I was looking forth of my lattice at the two days old moon, and the great planet Jupiter a-shining above him,¹ as it were a stone's cast . . . when I became ware of a fierce red light suddenly upburning from some distant village. Anon, a herdsman's horn windeth clamorously at our gate; and the portress tells me a poor swain craveth immediate speech of me; so I descended unto him, foreboding evil. He was a rough,

¹ The Saxon moon was masculine.

simple serf, all apant with haste ; and thus unto me he spake :—

“ At sunset drave I my flocks to fold. I tarried on the top of the cliff, and looked acrofs the sea. Then saw I what seemed a little white cloud, no bigger than my hand, a rising from the sea. Presently seven sail were shining in the sun. At length I counted thirty. Then fled I to give alarm ; but my knees trembled, and my tongue clave to the roof of my mouth. The fwains gathered to look out, but what could they do ? Some fled inland to spread the wail, some to drive off their ceap,¹ some to carry their wives and their children to the castle. Meantime landed the Danes. They swarmed like bees ; they ascended the cliffs like grafshoppers ; they brake not their ranks, they went forward every man on his ways, with his shield over his head. Like the noise of a flame of fire that devoureth the stubble was the hum of their voices. They enclosed and drave before them not a handful of sheep or kine, but whole herds and flocks, to feed thereof. By reason of their

¹ Cattle. Hence our milk-maids still summon their cows by calling, “ Cup ! cup ! ”

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numbers the land gathered blackness. They burned our thorp, and all the souls that were therein. Next they will come to the castle and the abbey. And now, holy mother, take thought what you shall do ; for who shall deliver you out of their hands ?”

I said, “Go and fend me Eadwulf, my land bailiff. And let all that are in distress, and all that are homeless, and all that are frightened, come within our precincts as fast as they can ; and we will do our best for one another.” Then I gave him a thrymsa,¹ and a drink of warm ale, for his soul was fainting within him. And his spirit returned unto him, and he went forth ; and the bell rang us to night prayer.

So soon as the keys were laid on the altar, and the nuns were in their cells, I gat me into the chapel, and lay down on my face before the altar, and prayed hard, and wept sore. And I said, Ah, Lord God, have mercy on us ; have mercy on Thy people England, and show this time what is the difference between a people that prayeth and a people that prayeth not ! Come among us, and with great might succour us, because there is none that fighteth for us but

¹ A fourpenny-piece.

only Thou, O Lord ! Wherefore should the Danes say, Where is now their God ?

Before glomung,¹ the next morning, the poor people came flocking unto us, some with a few sheep and cattle, some with only a pig or an ass, or a couple of hens, some with only the clothes on their backs, to take shelter within the precincts. Not that there was much safety to be expected within them : for our house, as I have elsewhere said, was chiefly getymbrade, and at the mercy of the first brand ; but it made a sort of rallying point ; the castle being already over-full : and some of the dwellers in lone forest booths and shepherds' huts had a notion, false enough, that the pagans would reverence holy ground ; others, more justly, thought God would care for His own, and be our buckler of defence : others had pity for us, and resolved to make common cause and fight for us, along with their own wives and children. And thus it fell, that the space enclosed with palisades round about our house, which might be as it were an half-acre, that a yoke of oxen might plough, was presently brim-full of women, children, and confused live stock ; while, without the stakes, on the only side that

¹ Dawn ; gloaming.

had no natural defence from the confluence of the two rivers, the men drew up, undisciplined and ill-armed enough, but staunch to a man, and ready to die at their posts ere an evil should happen unto us. But what were they against so many? And how wist I that the Lord's purpose would be to deliver us out of the hands of the heathen, any more than he had delivered any of the monasteries all along the eastern coast? I thought of Croyland; and how the grey-haired abbot was slain before the altar, the prior in the vestry, the sub-prior in the refectory; only a little child survived to tell the tale. I thought of Peterborough, with its abbey and its library, the glory of the age, for fifteen days a burning: the abbot and monks all slain. I thought of the nuns of Ely, who disfigured their faces, that they might astonish the Danes, who, indeed, fled away to a man; but not before they had set fire to the monastery and burned every soul alive. And now, here were these very Danes, headed by the selfsame chiefs, Guthrum, Amund, and Oskitul, masters and adepts in cruelty and rapine, within our sight, and even our hearing; for we could catch the faint rumour as of the yelling of a pack of fox-

hounds in some far-off upland, and now and then a huntsman's whoop, and a long, shrilling cry. And this set all the blood-hounds and wolf-hounds within our precincts baying ready to split their throats, and straining against their leashes; and the oxen lowing, and the porkers grunting, and the sheep bleating, and the infants wailing, and the mothers weeping and wishing there had been room for them in the castle. These latter I gave in charge to the nuns, to foster and comfort, and thereby divert their thoughts from their own strait a little; for, in sooth, they were sore bested; and many a white and many a black veil was quivering with fears that could not be stayed. I bade them be much in prayer: for myself, I stood on the wall, right over the gate, and prayed at my post; receiving news ever and anon, from some fresh scout; and now and then intermitting my prayer for the help of God with a passing wish for a little more help of man. For I could not help noting, with some bitterness of heart, that not a fighting man had come to our aid but such as were under my own jurisdiction; all the rest having doubtless mustered at the castle, which truly could make a better defence, but which therefore was all the

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less in need of them. Such are men, whom we women so often love more than we love God. But mark the issue! *The castle fell!* The Danes flew all the souls that were therein: they thereby obtained the command of the whole country round about; and the scouts brought news that, after carousing for a while, and emptying the castle larder and butteries, they were purposing to march upon us. Now arose one universal wail,—who can wonder thereat? Even Eadwulf turned red, and then white. . . . I have always forgotten to find a convenient place for saying, that my foster-father, having been sent on a special message to me just at the time our land-steward died, I had, to Eadwulf's great advantage and mine own, made him his successor. We now stood together on the wall: anon we see a great dust, and the glitter of spears and bossy shields. Presently the pagans were lost in a thicket. We were all praying hard, within and without the house; but it seemed the will of God we should be lost. Still I bare in mind, that it was as easy to Him to save by few as by many; the last moment, as the first; by a rumour among the mulberry-trees, or by the breaking of a few earthen

pitchers.¹ And I thought, Is His arm shortened, that it cannot save? May it not be His good pleasure to help us? But my senses were so quickened by the immediate presence of danger, that I think I could have heard a cock crow, or have seen a sunbeam light a weathercock twenty miles off. I heard Eadwulf mutter between his teeth, "I can die for her, but that won't save her!" . . . and he looked down the wall, and then quickly at me, as much as to say, "Shall we cast ourselves down headlong together?" But this was a suggestion of the evil one, for there were others within the house as defenceless as myself, and depending on me for protection; and I looked steadfastly away from him with mine eyes towards the wood, whence I expected each moment to see issuing the Danes. I heard him give a great sigh; but the next moment he uttered a loud cry, and, plucking me by the sleeve, pointed towards the Trent. Shading our eyes with our hands from the rays of the declining sun, we could make out a distant troop of horsemen advancing upon us from that direction, just as the first glimmer of spears showed the Danes emerging from the

¹ Judges vii. 20.

wood. We seemed hemmed in on either side ! I cried aloud, " Heaven help us ! "—but the same moment, Eadwulf, his face all a-blaze, shouts, " Praise the Lord, 'tis the king ! " And so it was ; and so Heaven *did* help us. We heard them from afar give three jolly English cheers—And did not our men cheer too ?

I Ethelfled can never dwell on that rescue without wet eyes.¹ From what a strait did the king that day work deliverance for me and the poor sisters ! . . . Ew ! how he and his men laid it on, and drove the villain pagans right into and across the Frome ! At his feet they dropped, they fell ; where they dropped down there they lay dead. The lean wolf and the hungry vulture rejoiced. It was a great, a deadly slaughter ; yea, they took much prey. The king was a mighty wind, that dispersed the clouds like mist : they rolled from the side of the hills, and the valleys laughed and sang. How his sword leaped out of his scabbard ! he loved to defend the weak. The field was strowed for miles with spears and cloven shields. He chased them back to the

¹ Asfer merely says, " They (the Danes) left Cambridge for Wareham, where was a nunnery, between the Frome and Trent, secure

¹ sides but one. Here Alfred made them swear on the Christian

' &c.

towers that rose on the rocky banks. Even here his hand did not leave them, nor his right hand cease to hold them, till they sware on his holy ring, the ring of the holy cross. Then he left them cowed and astounded, and returned with his warriors by night. And we went forth and sang jubilate, and spread him a feast of our best.

* * * * *

But what cared those unrightwise pagans for swearing on his holy ring, yea, or on their own bracelets, which they held much more sacred, or for breaking the holy truth, which they held not sacred on any wife? Had they kept it, they would have belied their own nature, which was akin to all evil. They attacked an outlying party of the king's horsemen the very same night, while we were making merry and giving of thanks within doors; and making off in the dark, they conveyed themselves to Exeter, whence the king in vain strove to dislodge them.

And now commenced the sorrowfullest season that England ever knew. Alas, my brother! would that I could have aided thee! or that the spirit of wisdom, and discretion, and strength, had been in thee, to know what to do, and to do it! Then, after the year of Seven Battles, thou wouldst not have been seven years a fugitive and

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a wanderer on the face of the earth, hunted like a partridge on the mountains, a steorlefs feolun, like David, the son of Jesse, in the wildernes; thy dwelling with the wild beafts of the field, and thy body wet with the dews of heaven, like unto the great king of Babylon. Oh! then was fulfilled the dark saying of Neot, that thou shouldst be humbled and brought low. Thy people witted not what had become of thee, and were as silly sheep lacking a shepherd, or as pigeons frightened from the corn. For their strength and their hope had perished from the Lord. His hand was not shortened, that it could not save; but our iniquities had separated between us and our God. Therefore He removed every stronghold as it were a tent that a man wrencheth up the pegs thereof; He tore up our homes as one easily draweth herbs out of the garden when the mould is wet with dew: He gave up the walls of our palaces into the hands of the enemy, and let our young men and maidens perish by the sword. We were a very scorn unto our foes, and a derision to those that were round about us. For this cause, our eyes ran down with water, and our cheeks were fouled with weeping. The sound of the harp and the

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rote was no more heard : the mirth of the land was gone. Easter was as sorrowful as Lent, and there was no merriment at Yule. The grape remained uncrushed : the ungathered apple dropped from the bough. The foxes might break the hedges, there was no man cared to snare them ; the wolves might prowl round our folds, there was no man had spirit to slay them ; the rooks might prey on the corn, there was no one minded to scare them. Men sate by the hearth and sighed ; or spake short, like a savage growl. They longed to unite and make head : and their thought was, Where is the king ?

My father was still at Rome ; so my mother took shelter with me. How sweet to have a refuge to offer my blessed mother ! We were in a less defenceless state than when the Danes took us at unawares ; for our poor house had been much repaired and strengthened by my direction ; and whereas our palisades were better for keeping nuns in than for keeping pagans out, the king, ere he departed from our coasts, gave commandment that a good stone wall should be getymbrade about us, on our weakest side. Indeed, this made our dwelling less cheerful, but far more secure ; and the king, to show

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how safe he held us to be, sent us sundry heavy chests, with cords well cnytted round them, containing I know not what, but, doubtless, plate and bags of treasure and goodly raiment; since we were to have them in strict charge, and they have never been claimed yet.

About this time, the following song was much in the mouths of the people:—

“What seekest thou in the brake? The blue eggs of the bulfinch.
 What seekest thou in the brake? The blue flowers of the speedwell,
 What seekest thou in the brake? The blue eyes of the king.
 What look ye for i' th' air? The path of a swallow.
 What look ye for i' th' air? The rising of a lark.
 What look ye for i' th' air? The flight of a king's arrow.
 Never yet look'd I for an eagle in a marle-pit,
 Nor for a curlew's nest in a green shaw.
 But yet in a forest have I seen a burnt spot where a king hath dress'd
 his meat.”

Thus their very songs were sorrowings, and their speech lamentings. For ourselves, we were shut in so close, that we were sometimes a long while without hearing aught of what was befalling, save from pilgrims, wayfarers, and the like, whom we hospitably entreated.

One day, a stranger, ragged, and with bleeding feet, came to the gate to crave an alms, and whileas he was yet speaking, he fell straightway all along upon the earth, by reason of his strength

failing him through travel and much fasting. We had him into the hospitium, and I washed his feet myself; and when his spirit returned unto him, I fed him with bread and wine. Then I sought of him news of the king; and there-upon, thus he spake:—

“I was sent by a chosen few to seek the king. Him sought I in Athelney. We would wit were he still alive, or must we choose us another king. Therefore disguised I myself, with clipped hair like a serf's, and I fouled my face and my hands, and went ragged and barefoot. I tracked him into the remote west, into a land of marshes and fens and stagnant waters. But I found not the hare in his form, neither the fox in his cover. One day an arrow whistled past me, and a man rushed after a fawn. I saw him anon through the bushes, and thought it was the king. I followed by stealth on his track: he had the fawn on his shoulders, and he made his way through the briers, down to the edge of a lake. There he untied a shallop, and ferried himself across. Then I followed the banks of the lake, till at length I came to a ford; I got across to the island, which was all in a tangle of wood. Many animals of the harmless sort were in it: I came

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upon goats, kids, and hares. I disturbed sundry pheasants, and heard the whirr of partridges. Anon I come to a glade, and see a woman milking a goat. She was wonderlike to look on for beauty: I knew her to be the queen. She carried her creche within-doors, into a little wattled cot. Then stole I up to the door, that was only sparred with a latch. I heard some one withinside reading; it seemed me, a godly book. The reader's voice was so pleasant, I would fain have lifted all night. Then I heard a young infant weeping, and the mother checked it, and said, 'You brat, if you wail so loudly, I will give you to the Danes!' But she smothered its cries with kisses, and the reader went on with his book. Another man's voice now sounded, and I heard him say, 'My king! there is little meat on this fawn, now I have skinned it.' Then he, I now knew for the king, made laughing answer, and said, 'Then you and I, my thegn, must eat the lefs, for I swear I'll hunt no more to-day.' Methought he was then stepping forth, so I raised the latch and begged. Wonderlike looked they all, and said, 'What, are we found out *here*?' And the king held some parley with me; but I let him not wit who I was. I begged

for a morfel of bread; and the king bade the thegn fetch a loaf. Quoth the thegn, 'We have but one left, and this we can scarcely spare.' Saith the king, 'This poor knave needs it most; I am minded that he shall have half. Oh that all the wants of my people could be in like manner supplied!' So he brake the loaf in twain . . . It was one of the loaves they call loudas. And I blessed him once and again. I was nigh saying something, but did not. My purpose thus far was fulfilled. I had learnt where abode the king. So I sped towards those who had sent me; but fell among thieves by the way. There was nothing they found to take from me, so they beat me and left me alone. But my strength was almost spent, and I think you have saved my life. I was bitter in heart when I found him with his fair wife and his friend in the hunter's booth. But my heart melted when he spake of his people, for I saw a tear in his eye: and methought something heavenlike within him was made known in his breaking of bread."

Now, from what I afterwards learned, it appeared that this thegn, for he was no less, returned unto those who had sent him, and made

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known unto them where he had found the king. Whereon they resorted unto him in the Royal Island, or Isle of Nobles, as it was afterwards indifferently called, and plighting anew their fealty, aided him their best to construct a place of safety, whence they might issue continually to harass the Dane. Sometimes they gat the better, sometimes the worse: but, on any wise, they returned, untracked, to their stronghold, which beginning to be wotted of by them that were faithful, their party waxed stronger and stronger. They made a rough bridge to the islet, on which they getymbrade two towers. Meantime, news was brought to the king of the movements of the Danes; but as the spies' reports agreed not always together, he wanted to have more certitude thereof.

One evening, when the days were lengthening, but still cold, I was sitting by the light of a fire of billets, when the portress ushered in, without a word, a tall, dark figure, clad in minstrel fashion, with a harp at his back, and holding by the hand a most sweet little child, some five years old, with fair hair falling all over her shoulders. I knew him at once for the king. After our first gladlike greeting, he said, "I

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come, Ethelfleda, to put under your safeguard our little Ethelgiva, who is minded to be with you as long as you will keep her; and her mother's wish and mine is, that you make her as much like yourself as you can." Then he set down his harp and warmed his hands, and dried his hair, which was wet with spring rain; and he said, "The time is now come to do something, and I hope to find how to do it. I am bound for the Danish camp." I said, "Ah, my brother, go not alone amid those fell Danes!" and forebore not to weep. But he answered and said, "If thou wouldst have a thing half done, trust it to thy neighbour; if thou wouldst have it whole done, do it thyself. I am weary of my life, with doing nothing to purpose for my people. And now I will muster them at a set place, and lead them to victory, or die. I have dreamed of holy Neot, who stood by me, and said, 'Up, why sleepest thou? behold, the set time is come.' So fill me a cup of wine, my sister; and weep not to break my heart."

Then, to cheer me and make me of good courage, he told me how brave-hearted and helpful Ethelfwitha had been; and for all the lowliness and incertitude of their living in

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Athelney, how pleasantlike it had been to harbour with her under the green boughs. "Only," quoth he, "I heard my people's cry in mine ears, day and night." And he told me what pains he had been at to find the place; and how he had carried Ethelfwitha acrofs to it on his shoulder.

"Before I found it," quoth he, "a man found me straying on the dun.¹ He asked me who I was, and what I fought. I told him I served the king, who had just been beaten, and I was looking for shelter. Thereon he took me home, to a herdman's rustic cot. They gave me food and lodging. I abode with them certain days. When the swain, whose name was Denulf, had herded his swine, he came in and sat by the fire, and, with acorns for counters, made reckonings. Thereon I laughed, and told him he should be a clerk: peradventure he had been born for a bishop.² He said, 'Better be a herd that can herd his swine, than a king that cannot save his people. If a wolf attacks my pigs, I throw stones at him, and chase him away; which is

¹ Down.

² The king afterwards encouraged him to apply to letters, and finally made him Bishop of Winchester.

more than king Alfred does with the Dane.' One Sabbath morn, the man and his meowla would go forth, leaving certain cakes, well bescwon and well gefyflod, a baking on a pan over the fire; and the good wyf me spake, 'Thou's nawt to tend save thine arrow an' thy baw: see to 't, lad, whenas t' one soid o' t' keaks is brownd, an' turn them to teother.' But well-away, my thoughts to other matters fled, and the *keaks* were finged; and the wyf, coming back, stormed like a sea-king, and smote one of mine ears and then the other. And, quoth she, 'Couldn't thee moind the keaks, lad? Beshrew thee for 't! thou loikes to eat them vast enow!'—I bare it meekly; only asking her whether she were of kin to Selethryth the nun."

Then we discourfed of sundry matters pertaining unto the kingdom; and also unto this poor house. Then he took up his harp, and arose to depart, saying, "You shall soon hear good or ill tidings." I showed him the stone wall, and said, "Thou hast enfafed us now, brother!" He gave it an earnest look, and made answer, "Oh yes, you are now strong enough: it may hap that I shall fend you the queen." And, looking round about him, and

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then at me, he said, "Thou'rt but young yet,—" gravelike : and, without another word, rode away. The place looked dull, in the dusk ; and, just then, he thought me a blot.¹

Or ere many suns had set, came the glad tidings that he had rallied his people in Selwood forest. At the stone of Egbert they met : a stone to be much set by. The news of his taking arms spread like wildfire ; the people flocked unto him with gladness. Nothing was to be heard but horns, trumpets, and the ringing of arms. Two days continued the mustering : on the third, the king led them forward. He inflamed their souls with his words ; who can speak like the king ? They came at length on the foe, carousing and making merry. Then, who shall tell what ensued ? They fought beneath the king's eye. First, the arrows flew like snow-flakes, then followed the lances ; and, anon, each man was hewing at another with his sword. As a standard-bearer rushed past, the king, in his heat, cried, " See ! Neot leads us ! " and the cry ran from mouth to mouth. What remains to tell ? The Danes were winnowed like chaff ; the victory remained with the king.

¹ A victim.

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It was a day to be much remembered. The king followed hard after them to their stronghold, and besieged them straitly. Men from all quarters continued to flock to his standard. The stronger waxed the king, the weaker waxed the Danes. Fourteen days they endured siege and great famine; then their souls were brought low, even the soul of Guthrum, and they fled for the king's mercy.

Then Alfred the king bare in mind his old saying, that he would sooner they were converted than confounded. And, having insisted on their submission to his will, whatsoever it should be, he put them under a brief course of preparation, and assembling them nigh unto Athelney, he caused them to be admitted into the church by the holy waters of baptism. He himself stood sponsor for Guthrum, who, with thirty chiefs, was baptized. It was a notable, a memorable day. - For twelve days the feast arose.

I wot there was joy in heaven over that fight; in special in the heart of holy Neot. The thing was done quickly. I had speech of one of the priests afterwards, who took part in preparing the candidates. "There was not time," quo' he, "for many subtleties . . . we just

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showed them how they might be saved by Christ. We hammered that well into them, and let the rest alone; for they were but poor, blind pagans." Thought I Ethelfled, ye might have done worfe.

When conventual and state affairs called me to Winchester, I found houses building and rebuilding on all sides; not after the old, rickety fashion, but good, substantial edifices of wood and stone. Every isern-smith and treow-whirta¹ that was craftlike was secure of full employment and good wages. Goldsmiths, seolfersmiths, glaziers,² and artificers of every description were in high request; and in spite of the troubled times, many came from beyond seas. The certitude and readines of the king's payment made his integrity esteemed of all. His credit stood high; for even kings are in good or bad credit, like the veriest merchants, according as they pay their bills and keep their promises; and though there was at the outset a hard run upon his exchequer, yet the money

¹ Blacksmith and carpenter, i.e. tree-worker.

² "Even in the seventh century, Boniface, abbot of Weremouth, procured men from France, who not only glazed church windows, but taught the Anglo-Saxons the art of making glass for windows, lamps, drinking vessels, &c."—SHARON TURNER.

went in a circle and came round again. For why? the ifern-smiths and stone-mafons being punctually paid, could in their turns pay for their meat and drink, instead of running up scores at the ale-thelun; the bakers, brewers, and fo forth could pay their scores and fines in due feafon, without reviling the collectors or flipping out of fight to hide among their ftuff; people that had buried their money and plate dug it up again; and thus, as I fay, the coin of the realm was current, and the more fitly for being round inftead of clipped, ran merrily back into the treafury. "The rolling hælfing doubles as it goes." This is the true end and courfe of money, in purfuing which, it bleffes both giver and receiver. And thus it fell, that all his doings being ordered in the fame wife-like and honeft fpirit, the king came of all men to be relied on; and the confidence in him fhortly became fuch, that moft, and at length all the Saxon kings round about him voluntarily put themfelves in fubjection under him, and made him, in fine, head and mafter of all England. This bloodlefs victory over their hearts and minds was dearer to him, I wot, than many a victory over the Danes. He conquered the

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pagans by the assistance of others ; he won his brother kings entirely by what he was.

Now the rest of the acts of king Alfred, and the good deeds that he did, and the wise laws that he made, and the ships that he getymbrade ; is it not all set down by Affer ? Also, how he established the Danes under Guthrum, in East Anglia, where they turned their swords into pruning-hooks, and cultivated the land, and would not countenance the fresh swarms of Danes that landed, and fought, and were beaten. Thereafter, the country had much prosperity. And Tinne the Cornishman made this song, that was much sung by the people :—

“ Oh, England, know thy blessings ! See ! the Lord hath given thee a good king. The ceap feed in the pastures ; a little child may guard them. The girls may go to the wells : gold bracelets hang safe on the highways. The swains sow corn in the spring, for they look to thresh it in winter. Set up the Maypole ! set the cyder running ! We are at peace and in safety ; we, the happy ones ! Dearest men, praise the Lord. The monks may now fish up their church-plate from the water-pits : also the nuns may sleep sweetly in their cells. The wolf gnaws his own fore-foot, for there are no dead bodies. Wisdom increaseth, wealth increaseth ; let us glorify God. Oh, England, know thy blessings ! ”

Howbeit, the Canaanite is still in the land. Of a verity, I thought when Guthrum was baptized, the kingdom of heaven was coming at last ; but no, the set time was not come. Well, there is

a Canaanite, too, in the little world of our own hearts, that will continue there so long as we are in the body : but it rests with ourselves whether to starve or to pamper him. What remaineth to say ? Alfred the king was twenty and eight years old when he returned unto his kingdom. That was ten years ago ; and here am I, still abbess of this poor house. Shaftesbury abbey is being getymbrade, but I doubt very much if I shall accept the mitre thereof ; for I have become used to mine old quarters, though they are gloomy, and unto mine old nuns, though they are stupid. My rule is become popular, so that I have been constrained to refuse many postulants, in spite of the new wing. Among the fresh comers have been one or two hopeful ones ; and one or two, that for conscience' sake I have been constrained to recommend to return unto the world. One of these was a girl whom I found dashing her head against a pillar, for that she said our rule was not hard enough. Afterwards she was a prey to unaccountable diseases, and one day fell to rolling herself very swiftly along the floor of the chapel, till she reached the shrine of our patroness ; when, with a deep sigh, she exclaimed, " Now, praise to St. Audrey, I am

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cured!" Many would have made a miracle of it, which indeed was what she wanted; but I am, it may be, even too hard of belief in such events, unless undeniably authenticated; and as the girl proved a deceiver, I was glad the thing was done in a corner. Alfred the king is very fond of monasteries: peradventure because he never lived in one himself. They are indeed necessary and expedient for the times; but if times are greatly bettered, it may be we shall learn to do without them. And as for safety!—only look at Winchester, and Croyland, and Ely. Ethelfwitha, just as she was setting forth from our abbey-gate with her gay retinue, all pranked and glittering in the morning sun, cried, "Farewell, Ethelfled; I envy you your peaceful life:" but what witteth she, I aspire to know, of my joys or burthens? She sees me take my place now and then in the great council, and hears my good report of pilgrims and travellers, and has fate by while Eadwulf consulted me about eel dikes and salt pans, and what to sow, and what to mow, and so many ambra of malt, and so many fotha of firewood, and whether we shall send so many systers of honey to such a monastery in return for their hens, or whether we may

look for salmon-trouts from such another in return for our eels; all of which Eadwulf loves to roll under his tongue in hearing of the queen Ah, my sister, you see not the other half of the gate-post!

My little niece is the joy of my life! She is stedfastly minded to profess, and when she cometh to fit years, if she be still of the same mind, no doubt, the king will be consenting. She may be abbess of Shaftesbury instead of myself, if she will. The little lamb clave to me from the first, and would reverently lay her hand on my garment, as if it were almost too holy to be touched. And she would sing snatches of hymns in her sleep, and have dreams of heaven; and, if she awoke in the night, would slip out of bed, and down upon her knees, with her pretty hands held up, and there, maybe, drop asleep. Therefore there went a saying forth, that she was too good to live. But, nevertheless, she is thriving and of good cheer unto this day.

Here endeth the Chronicle of Ethelfled.



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